

Ash and Serena's Atomic Odyssey

By: Ander Arias

Crossover with Pokemon Uranium. After Kalos, Ash and his friends go to the Tandor region, where they will meet friends both new and old, rivalries will be born and love will bloom. However, the ghost of a past tragedy will cast a dark shadow over our heroes' adventure. Will they be able to save Tandor from an impending cataclysm that has been 10 years in the making?
Amourshipping

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When a story ends, a new one begins

Author's Note: Greetings, readers, both old and new, and welcome to my newest story! While I'm not new to the Pokemon fandom, this is the first time I'm going to write something other than a oneshot. Hope it goes well!

Now, like it says in the summary, this is an adaptation of the Pokemon Uranium fangame as if it existed in the anime's universe. Now, I want to assure you guys that you don't need to have played the game to understand this story . Every element unique to this fangame will be properly explained. Though if you need additional help, Pokemon Uranium's wikia and its TVTropes page, particularly the character section, are great tools.

This story is also crossposted on Ao3, if you happen to prefer that site, under the same title.

Without further ado, let's go!

Ash and Serena's Atomic Odyssey

Chapter 1:

When One Story Ends, a New One Begins

Unknown Location

The large chamber was dark. Most of the lights that would illuminate it were out, with only emergency lights being there to alleviate the darkness. There was enough light, however, to see one of his pokemon's still form, laying on the cold metallic ground, at the proverbial feet of the imposing figure of the creature that had delivered such a swift defeat.

It was also hot. So much hot. While his suit allegedly protected him from extreme temperatures, it seemed it wasn't as insulated as he believed. Every spot on his skin was covered in sweat, leaving him drenched. But now, no matter how uncomfortable he was, he couldn't afford to care about that one bit.

" Does it sink yet, children? How useless your efforts to stop me are?" the being in front of them said, their distorted, quasi-mechanical voice dripping mockery. **"How big the gap in power between you and me is?"**

Gritting his teeth, Ash returned his defeated Pokemon to their pokeball, as a loud beep coming from his wrist drew his attention. Bringing up the small control panel on his wrist, Ash read the warning message flashing on the tiny screen:

RADIATION SHIELDS: 18% (Aprox. duration:10-12 minutes)

IT IS URGENTLY RECOMMENDED TO RECHARGE THE HAZARD SUIT. IF RECHARGE IS NOT POSSIBLE, ABANDON THE IRRADIATED AREA IMMEDIATELY

Yeah, no, that wasn't an option. Too many lives depended on the outcome of this battle. Then again, even if his Pokemon were protected against the intense levels of radiation, Ash, Serena and Clemont's protection depended on the hazard suits they were wearing, and the moment they run out of power, it would be the end.

"Guys, how are you doing?" Ash asked.

"My radiation shield is at ten percent," Clemont replied after checking his screen.

"Seven percent," Serena replied.

" Tick tock, children," their enemy mocked once again. **"It seems your time is running out. Will you spend your last minutes**

fruitlessly fighting me, or are you going to comply? Do so, and I'll make sure your suffering is... bearable, at the very least."

Surrender wasn't an option either. And even if it was, Ash would never take it. Ash gripped his last pokeball. It was funny how the pokémon inside wanted a second chance so badly... and he had more chances than either of them could have bargained for.

Ash now hoped this wouldn't be their last chance either.

"Does this answer your question? Greninja, I choose you!"

The dark vault was briefly illuminated by a blue flash as Greninja materialized, prepared to fight as he always had been, while he and his faithful Pokémons from Kalos steeled themselves for the upcoming fight. And as he gave his first order, Ash couldn't help but think of how it all started, so many months ago...

...

Prism Tower, Lumiose City, Kalos, many months ago

The mood was quiet. And for somebody who had been part of this traveling group of four, it was something unusual.

However, it was also expected, since the silent mood heralded the end of what it had been an epic journey across the region of Kalos. And the end of the journey signaled the end of their little group as well.

The Kalos League was over, so there was no more reason for Ash to stay at Kalos. The Master Class Showcase was over as well, so there was no more reason for Serena to be on Kalos either. It was time for them to leave the region in order to pursue their goals, while Clemont and Bonnie would stay in Kalos, given that Clemont was planning to resume his job as Lumiose City's Gym Leader.

For the last couple days, Ash and Serena had been bunking at the Prism Tower, since it was better than staying at a Pokemon Center, and Clemont and specially Bonnie had enjoyed their company greatly, but their time together would soon come to an end. Goodbyes were always hard, but for Bonnie especially; she already had to say goodbye to Squishy, as well as Ash's Goodra, who was taken back to his home on the wetlands, and soon it would be Ash and Serena's turn.

Or it would be the case, if it wasn't for a certain videocall.

"The rest of you should come to Pallet Town as well. After all that awful stuff with Team Flare, I'm sure all of you could use a little vacation."

Ash had made a videocall to his mother, Delia Ketchum, to tell her about his journey through Kalos, and that he was going to head home soon, when Delia invited the rest of the group to come with Ash as well, if only temporarily. Ash looked at his friends with an expectant smile.

"So, what do you say, guys?" Ash asked. "It'd be great if you guys got to see my home town. Oh! And maybe you can meet all the Pokemon that I caught on my journeys through other regions."

"Pika-pi!" Pikachu added, nodding.

"Really? That sounds great!" Bonnie cheered, jumping up and down. She was going to take advantage of every opportunity to stay with her friends a little longer, but the prospect of meeting plenty of cute new Pokemon won her even further. She turned at her older brother with pleading eyes. "Can we, big brother? Please say yes!"

"Well, I need to resume my job as Gym Leader, especially now that Clemont won't be able to fill me in..." Clemont began, seemingly crushing Bonnie's hopes. Then, he looked at a nearby window, where many severely damaged buildings during Team Flare's attack, most of them now in the process of being rebuilt, could be seen.

"Then again, with the state the city is in, I don't think we're going to get many challengers anytime soon, so why not? We could use some time to relax!"

"YES!" the energetic blond girl cheered, jumped into the air.

"Nenene!" her Dedenne cheered as well.

Bonnie then turned towards Serena. "What about you, Serena? You're coming with us, right?"

The performer was a bit taken aback by the sudden question. On one side, there were still a few weeks until Contest Season began, so she could afford to spend a little more time with her friends -and most importantly, her crush-, but on the other hand, she also wanted to use that time to explore Hoenn a little, learn about the Pokemon there, and maybe catch a new Pokemon or two.

"Well?"

Ash's question snapped her from her thoughts, and realized that everybody was looking at her, expecting her answer. Having no more time to ponder over what she wanted to do and what she believed she should do, she let her more selfish thoughts win out.

"Sure, you can count me in," Serena said, smiling at them.

"Awesome!" Ash cheered, before he turned back to the videophone. "You hear that, mom?"

"Yes. I'll make sure to have everything ready so your friends can stay at home with us," Delia replied.

"Then it's settled! To Pallet Town!" Ash announced, followed by a trio of cheers.

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Viridian City, Kanto

Overall, the flight from Kalos to Kanto was both swift and uneventful, something the group was thankful for. As they left the airport, the group walked out of the city and headed south to Pallet Town via Route 1.

As they walked through the green grass fields, Ash told his friends about the beginning of his journey, how Pikachu refused to obey him, how he failed to catch even the weakest of Pokemon, and how he was attacked by a flock of angry Spearow.

"You were almost killed by a bunch of Spearow? That's horrible!" Serena gasped, covering her mouth with her hands. However, memories started to flood in from her own beginning as a trainer, and remembered that she was also attacked by wild Pokemon on a regular basis, at least before she joined Ash, Clemont and Bonnie. Then again, unlike Ash, at least Fennekin wasn't disobedient.

"Truth be told, I was the one who attacked one of their own first," Ash admitted. Then, his expression changed as if he remembered something. "Oh! Do you guys mind if we take a little detour? There's a certain somebody I want to greet before I go back home."

"A certain somebody?" Bonnie repeated.

"Nene?" Dedenne asked as well.

"Yeah. An old friend who is very precious to me. Don't worry, it won't take us long," Ash assured them.

The group abandoned the dirt road that crossed the grass field, and let Ash lead them into what appeared to be a small forest. The forest wasn't empty, though, as many Pidgey and Pidgeotto were flying around, while others were perched on trees, carefully looking at the newcomers. The deeper they got into the forest, the more bird Pokemon showed up.

"Ash? Is your friend nearby?" Clemont asked, his voice sounding nervous, as he glanced at the increasing number of Pokemon

around them, which appeared to look at them with a disapproving eye.

"Yeah, I have the feeling that this forest is their house and that we aren't welcomed," Serena fearfully added, holding her hands.

"Don't worry guys, you have nothing to fear from these Pokemon," the Kanto native assured. Then, he looked at the sky, and smiled. "And there he is!"

"PIGEO!"

A loud caw came from above, as a shadow blocked the sun for a second. Looking upwards, the Kalos trio saw a bird Pokemon similar to Pidgey and Pidgeotto descending from the skies, except this Pokemon was much bigger in size, and its crest, as long as its body, was yellow with red trims. While the Kalos trio knew of Pidgey and Pidgeotto, they had never seen this Pokemon before, which prompted Serena to scan it with her Pokedex.

" Pidgeot, the Bird Pokemon. Pidgeotto's evolution and final form of Pidgey. Its powerful wings allow it to create windstorms with a few flaps, and is fast enough to fly at Match 2 speed." the Pokedex droned.

As soon as the Pidgeot landed, Ash walked towards him and started to pet his head. Pikachu then jumped from Ash's shoulder to the ground, and started to animatedly talk to Pidgeot as well, the large bird replying in kind. As the two Pokemon conversed, Ash turned towards his Kalos friends.

"Guys, this is Pidgeot. He's the second Pokemon I ever caught when he was just a Pidgeotto," he began. "I released him so he could protect and take care of the flock of Pidgey and Pidgeotto that live here. However, I also promised him to come to visit whenever I could."

"Whoaaa, so cool!" Bonnie gushed, as she fearlessly walked towards the giant bird. "You're such a cutie, Pidgeot! Did anybody tell you that?"

Pidgeot cawed softly, seemingly accepting the compliment. Bonnie then started to rub the large bird's neck, while everybody else watched and smiled.

"Hey Bonnie, would you like to fly on his back?" Ash suggested, while patting Pidgeot.

"... really!?" she replied, sounding as if somebody offered her her heart's biggest desire.

"No way!" Clemont interrupted, as he stomped forward. "Bonnie, flying on a Pokemon is way too dangerous! You could slip and fall down!"

"Why don't you fly with her, Clemont?" Serena suggested. "That way you can make sure she stays safe the whole trip."

"W-What? Me-"

"Pidgeot is strong enough to carry the two of you," Ash added, with the bird in question proudly nodding as well.

"Come on Clemont, don't deprive Bonnie of such a joy," Serena said, while Bonnie made puppy eyes.

Eventually, the inventor sighed in defeat. "Okay... but he better fly low and calm!"

"Don't worry, Pidgeot will keep you safe. Right, buddy?" Ash asked, as he helped Bonnie get on the big bird's back.

"PIGEO!" Pidgeot cawed in affirmation.

"Good," Ash said, before helping Clemont as well. Once the Lumiose siblings were set, Ash told his second capture: "We're heading to

Pallet Town, so take them there. However, you heard Clemont; fly slow and steady, and don't get close to the clouds."

Pidgeot cawed once again and nodded. The Bird Pokemon shot into the sky, while Bonnie let out a loud cheer and Clemont a high pitched scream of terror, while Ash watched Pidgeot take off with pride and Serena chuckled in amusement.

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Since Clemont and Bonnie were soaring the skies on top of Pidgeot, that left Ash and Serena alone to walk the rest of the way to Pallet Town. The Kalosian girl then realized that she was alone with Ash. Even if she no longer blushed madly and her brain no longer came up with ideas like "it's as if we're on a date!", the thought of being alone with her crush still made her heart flutter a little.

Well, not exactly alone as Pikachu was still with them, perched on Ash's shoulder as usual, but the yellow rodent rarely got in their way.

"So..." Serena began, mostly to break the silence. "... do you have any idea of what are you going to do next? Any new region you're planning to visit?"

"Hm? No, not really," Ash said. "I rarely plan my next destination. Whenever I visit a new region is because somebody tells me about it, or somebody sends me there as a part of a favor or an errand or something like that. I don't need to do anything, the next adventure will soon come calling."

"Is that how you decided to go to Kalos?" Serena asked.

"Yeah. I met Alexa on the Decolore Islands, shortly after I left Unova. She told me about her sister, Viola, who was a Gym Leader in Kalos, and suggested me to go there and take part on its League," Ash told her.

"I see," Serena replied.

Now that she thought about it, she hadn't planned to go to Hoenn on her own volition either, but because Palermo suggested her to go there. She couldn't help but wonder if there was an invisible, mysterious force that send Pokemon trainers to their next destination.

"You're going to love Hoenn," Ash began. "It's an awesome place with lots of cool Pokemon and great places to visit, I'm sure you'll have a great time. Though some people say there's too much water. Some of them went as far as to awaken a Legendary Pokemon to create more land. Crazy, huh?"

Serena couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at such silly thought and especially disproportionate response to it.

"Crazy indeed," Serena said, nodding. "So, since you've been in Hoenn, I take you saw a contest or two while being there?"

"More than one or two!" Ash replied with a hearty laugh. "Lots of them! Took part in a couple myself, even. Mostly for fun, though."

"Oh. I didn't expect you to be so big on contests," Serena said, raising an eyebrow. Even after all this time, there were still things about Ash that she was unaware of.

"Well, it's not that I'm that much into contests. A girl I used to travel with in Hoenn, May, was an aspiring coordinator. So naturally, me and our other friends watched all her contests and cheered her on," Ash explained.

Serena couldn't help but feel a pang of jealousy upon Ash mentioning that he used to travel with another girl.

"And she wasn't the only one. Another girl I befriended while in Sinnoh, Dawn, was also a coordinator as well," Ash continued, before his smile became a little less joyous. "She was really close to become a Top Coordinator, but failed at the very end," he shook his

head. "Such a pity. Oh well, at least she knew not to give up, and continues working hard to achieve her dream."

"It seems that you traveled with a lot of people before we started to travel together," Serena began, as she started to touch her blue ribbon. "Just how many people did you travel with before meeting Clemont, Bonnie and me?"

Ash started to tell her of her previous traveling companions: Misty, her very first traveling friend who only tagged along because he wanted Ash to pay for her bike that Pikachu had fried. Brock, his second friend, and the one who stood with him the longest.

Then there was Tracey, whom joined the group in lieu of Brock when Ash visited the Orange Islands. Followed by May and her brother Max in Hoenn. Then Dawn in Sinnoh, and finally Iris and Cilan in Unova. All of them eventually split from the group when the path to pursue their goals and dreams took them somewhere else.

" Just like I will say goodbye to Ash when I go to Hoenn and he goes somewhere else," Serena sadly thought. She then directed her sight forward, and saw what appeared to be a small town appearing in the horizon. "Ash, I'm seeing a few houses over there. Is that Pallet Town?"

Ash smiled happily and nodded. "It is. Welcome to my hometown!"

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Ash and Serena rejoined with Clemont and Bonnie after Pidgeot dropped them at the edge of the town. Bonnie was bouncing excitedly up and down, gushing about how amazing the flight was. While Clemont was much less shaken than Ash and Serena had anticipated him to be, he was still trembling from the experience.

Ash thanked Pidgeot, and the bird returned to his home on the small forest of Route 1, and Ash lead his Kalosian friends towards his house. It was a two-story white-wooden house, with a small garden,

surrounded by a white wooden fence. While not too big or too fancy, it had a very lovely and cozy feeling to it.

"Mom, I'm home!" Ash announced, as he entered, his friends following behind.

"Ash, honey!" a brown haired woman in her early thirties dressed in casual clothes appeared, and gave Ash a hug. "I'm so happy to have you back!"

"I'm happy to be back too," Ash replied.

"And of course, I'm glad to see you too, Pikachu!" Ash's mom said, as she rubbed the yellow rodent's cheek.

"Pikaaa!" Pikachu squealed.

"Mom, these are the friends I made in Kalos: Serena, Clemont and Bonnie," Ash began. "Guys, this is my mom."

"Delia Ketchum. Any friend of my son will always be welcomed in this house," Delia said, her disposition as warm as the sun itself.

"Mime mime!"

That moment, a Mr. Mime suddenly appeared, and without ever asking, took the backpacks of Ash and his friends, and carried them upwards.

"Oh, and that's Mimey. He's part of our little family as well," Delia said. "He's very hardworking and helpful. He'll be taking your bags to your rooms. I already made all the preparations for your stay here. Serena and Bonnie will be sharing the guest room, while Clemont will be sleeping on Ash's room."

"Thanks a lot for having us, Mrs. Ketchum. We'll try not to bother you much," Clemont said.

"Nonsense! Like I said before, any friend of Ash will never bother me," Delia insisted. "Anyway, is there something you need? You must be hungry and tired after the flight. Why don't you all rest on the living room while I prepare some snacks?" the woman helpfully offered.

"That sounds great, mom, but not just yet. I still need to go to Professor Oak's lab in order to drop my Pokemon there with the rest," Ash announced, before turning to his friends. "Do you guys wanna come with me?"

Of course, such question turned out to be unnecessary.

...

Professor Oak's Ranch

The moment Ash and his friends arrived at the ranch where all of his Pokemon were living, they were immediately swarmed by an army of many Pokemon the Kalosian trio deduced they were Ash's, all fighting and pushing each other to greet their beloved trainer first.

"Boy, I knew Ash must have plenty of Pokemon given how many regions he had been in, but I wasn't expecting to be this many!" Serena exclaimed in shock. "Not even Professor Sycamore had that many Pokemon in his lab!"

"I know, right!" Bonnie gushed, as she petted one of Ash's Pokemon, one that looked like a large orange turtle. "When I'm a trainer, I want to have as many Pokemon, at the very least!"

"Torkoal!" the Pokemon cried, seemingly enjoying the attention Bonnie was paying to him.

Serena took out her Pokedex in order to scan it.

" Torkoal, the Coal Pokémon. Torkoal burns coal within its body to produce energy. As a defense, Torkoal is able to release smoke from

its nostrils and its back to confuse enemies. "

"So, that's your name, huh? Torkoal? Great!" Bonnie cheered.

"Come out, everyone!" Ash said, throwing his four Pokeball into the air, releasing Greninja, Talonflame, Hawlucha and Noivern. The four Kalos Pokemon took a moment to inspect the new surroundings.

"Everyone, I befriended these Pokemon during my journey through Kalos. Make sure they feel at home, okay?"

All his Pokemon cried in affirmation. They always loved when Ash brought new members to their ever growing group, though some considered it a family. Serena couldn't help but smile tenderly at how strong Ash's bond with his Pokemon was, even if it was obvious that he only got to see most of them on certain occasions.

Then, all of sudden, Serena felt a chill creeping through her spine, as if a dark presence had made her the target of its wrath. Turning around, Serena saw a four legged yellow Pokemon with leaves around its neck and its head -it was clearly at least part grass-type-glaring at her as if she was its natural enemy.

"Um... hi?" Serena awkwardly greeted, but the Pokemon continued to glare at her.

Serena's Pokedex, still in her hand, scanned the newcomer.

" Bayleef, the Leaf Pokémon, and the evolved form of Chikorita. Bayleef emits a spicy aroma from the leaves around its neck able to restore energy."

"So, um, you're Bayleef, huh?" Serena awkwardly asked.

"Bay... !" Bayleef dismissively said, before turning around and walking away.

"Okay... that was weird..."

The Kalosian trio spend most of the afternoon getting to know all of Ash's Pokemon at Oak's ranch.

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"I know you've only been here for little over a day, but what do you think of Pallet Town?" Delia asked.

It was the dawn of the next day, and everybody was having breakfast at the Ketchum residence, while Pikachu ate alongside Dedenne and Serena and Clemont's respective Pokemon.

"It's really nice and calm. Compared to how busy and noisy Lumiose City can be, it's a rather appreciated change of pace," Clemont replied.

"I know, right? Most people would find a little town like this one boring, but if you want to relax, there's no better place than Pallet Town," Delia proudly said. "So, do you plan to do anything today? It's a lovely day to stay outside."

"You bet it! I'm going to get some training done with my Pokemon. I could tell from yesterday that they really missed a good fight with me," Ash enthusiastically said, before looking at his friends. "Of course, you guys tag along if you want. I think my Pokemon like you a lot."

"You betcha I'm going to go!" Bonnie said, so excited her voice came more as a squeal..

"Yeah, me too," Serena added, sounding far more calm..

"Maybe later. Last night I had an idea for a new invention I want to work on," Clemont said.

"In that case, make sure you work far away from here. You don't want to leave Ash and his mother homeless when your gadget ends up blowing up," Bonnie deadpanned.

"B-Bonnie! That was uncalled for! Not all my inventions end up exploding!" Clemont protested.

"You know, if this was a cartoon, that comment would be followed by a montage of all the times your inventions had done exactly that, big bro," Bonnie replied in the same dry tone, shaking her head, before she turned towards Ash and asked: "Anyway, are we going or not?"

"Nenene!" Dedenne insisted on his trainer's behalf.

They decided not to keep Bonnie waiting anymore, and after bidding a "see you later" to Clemont and Ash's mom, the trio headed back to the ranch, Bonnie running as fast as her short legs took her, while Ash and Serena walked at a more calmer pace. Serena thanked the opportunity to be alone with Ash again, as there was something she needed to ask him, and while it wasn't something too intimate, she preferred not to have other people around.

"So, do you plan to train today?" Serena asked.

"Yep!" Ash happily confirmed. "I know we came here to relax, but you know me, I can't-"

Serena smiled. "Don't worry, Ash, I'm not going to chastise you or anything. I've been with you long enough to know that you don't do calm and quiet. Besides, I'm sure that you want to spend time with the rest of your Pokemon."

"Yeah, that too."

Serena clutched her blue ribbon with her index finger and thumb. "I'm asking because... well... I wonder if you could lend me a hand with something..."

"Oh? Sure! Whatever it is, I will help you, no problem!" Ash assured, eager to help as ever. "So, what do you want me to help you with?"

This brought a smile to the performer's face. "You see, last night, before going to bed, I did some research on contests. You know, so I know what I'm getting into and to be properly prepared once I start taking part in them."

"Sounds about right," Ash said.

"I learned how the contests are structured and what do you have to do. The first part, the Appeal Round, doesn't worry me. It's very similar to the Freestyle Performance, except the coordinator doesn't take part on it. Despite the differences, I'm confident my experience as a performer will be of a big help," Serena explained.

"... but you're worried about the Contest Battle, right?" Ash filled the blanks.

Serena averted his gaze, and looked at her feet, feeling something between a little embarrassment and disappointment in herself.

"Yeah... I never gave it much thought before, but I'm not that good when it comes to Pokemon battles. So I was wondering if, for the time we're here... would you mind helping me train?"

"Sure!" Ash didn't even take a second to answer.

"Really?" Serena asked, surprised by his fast answer. "But what about the training you were going to do with your Pokemon?"

"Who says I can't do both?" Ash replied. "Besides, even if it wasn't the case, you're only going to stay here for a few more days, and my Pokemon aren't going anywhere. So I like to spend the few days we still have left together before it's time to say goodbye. And if I can use that time to help you, then the better!"

Serena could feel her cheeks warming up, and once again she was reminded why did she fell in love with this boy so badly. "T-Thank you Ash, that's very kind of you."

"Don't sweat it," Ash said. "Anyway, there's a large grass field behind the ranch where we can battle without bothering other Pokemon. Meet me there in five minutes. I'm going to the ranch to pick the Pokemon I'll be using against you."

"Alright."

...

A few minutes later, at the spot Ash had mentioned, Serena was waiting for Ash, with Braixen out of her Pokeball. The performer then saw Ash running towards their impromptu battlefield, Pikachu trailing behind.

"Alright, here I am!" Ash announced. "You ready for the fight?"

"Shouldn't we bring somebody to act as referee?" Serena asked.

Ash shrugged. "I don't see why. This isn't an important fight, just a sparring to help you become a better battler. Besides, it's not that either of us is going to cheat," Ash said.

"Pi-Pikachu," Pikachu added, nodding.

"So, I take you're going to use Braixen?" Ash asked.

"If I'm going to fight against you... Braixen is my strongest Pokemon. No offense to Pancham and Sylveon, but I don't feel confident with any other Pokemon given my opponent;" Serena explained.

Ash smiled reassuredly. "Don't worry, I don't plan to go too hard on you. Anyway, this is my pick: Gible I choose you!" Ash said, tossing a pokeball forward.

The pokeball then released a small shark-like Pokemon with dark faded blue skin, a red underbelly, stubby arms and legs, and a huge mouth full of sharp teeth. Not knowing what she was facing, Serena pulled out her Pokedex for information:

" Gible, the Land Shark Pokémon. Gible once lived in the tropics, and to avoid cold, it lives in caves warmed by geothermal heat."

A frown formed on Serena's face when he saw the Dragon/Ground typing. That means that Ash had the advantage in both attack and defense. Then again, it might have been deliberate on his part: you don't get better by taking only the easiest roads.

"Gib!" Gible said, as he jumped at Ash, chomping on his head, causing the boy to cry in pain.

"Ash!" Serena called in horror.

"It's okay, don't worry, Gible tends to do this. It's his way of showing affection," Ash said, half laughing, before prying Gible from his head. "Are you ready, Serena?" Ash asked.

"Yes! Let the battle begin!"

~Ash (Gible) VS Serena (Braixen)~

"Alright Serena, you make the first move!" Ash offered.

Serena nodded, her expression hardening as she was filled with determination. "Braixen, Flamethrower!"

"Brai Brai!" Braixen said, as she waved her already ignited wand towards Gible, releasing a stream of flames.

"Gible, dodge it with Dig!" Ash commanded.

"Gib!" Gible replied, as he buried himself underground, just before the torrent of fire sailed harmlessly above him.

Serena bit her lip and repressed a curse upon seeing her opening move fail so badly. Braixen looked at her, waiting for her guidance, but Serena was having trouble coming up with a solution. *"Okay, Ash uses Iron Tail or other powerful physical moves to force an*

underground Pokemon back to the surface, but Braixen has no such attacks! What can I-"

"GIB!"

Serena was snapped out of her thoughts when Gible burst from underground just behind Braixen, and slammed his little body against her. Still, there was a lot of strength behind the blow, enough to make Braixen fall on her belly.

"Oh no! Braixen, quickly, get up!"

A single blow wasn't enough to bring the Fox Pokemon down, and she quickly jumped back to her feet. However, as she did so, Ash was ready to continue the attack.

"Gible, Dragon Pulse!"

"GIIIB!" Gible cried, before opening his jaws, releasing a dragon-shaped energy stream of swirling colors, mostly dark purple, blue and magenta.

"Braixen, counter it with Flamethrower!" she ordered.

Braixen repeated the same move again, casting a wave of flames from her wand towards the incoming dragon-shaped blast. Both attacks collided, resulting in an explosion that followed by a cloud of smoke and dirt.

"Good one, Serena. However, if this was a contest battle, you would have lost a few points for using the same attack twice in a row," Ash gently chided.

"I see," Serena said, her voice carrying an annoyed edge, before forcing herself to calm down with a deep breath. "No spamming the same attack, got it. Braixen, use Hidden Power!"

"Braix!" the Fox Pokemon cried, waving her wand, summoning several rainbow colored orbs of energy, before sending them

towards the fading cloud of smoke with another wave. The attack fully dispelled the cloud upon crossing through it.

"Gible, use Dig again!" Ash ordered.

The small dragon once again dug underground, dodging Serena's attack. The honey blonde unwittingly clenched her fists upon seeing her attack being evaded once again with the same maneuver. And what's worse, she knew that Gible would attack from a blind spot.

"Come on Serena, think! There must be something Braixen can do to counter that. If she can't take Gible out, then... wait, I got it!"

Serena thought, a wide smile spreading across her face. "Braixen, jump into the air, and use Fire Blast on the ground!"

"Brai Brai!" Braixen cried affirmatively. She jumped as high as her legs allowed her to, while raising her wand into the air, the flame on its tip growing into a massive fireball. The fireball then took the shape of the kanji of fire, and waving her wand down, she send the mass of flames downwards.

"Gible!" Gible had chose that moment to make his move and emerged from underground, but rather than Braixen, all what the tiny dragon found was a wall of raging fire coming down at him. "GIB!?"

The Fire Blast hit Gible squarely, engulfing him inside a torrent of roaring flames.

"Gible, no!" Ash cried in shock.

"Pika!" Pikachu added.

When the flames dispelled, Gible was covered in soothe and burn marks, but still had enough energy to jump back to his feet and continue the fight. Ash let out a sigh of relief.

"Good job, Serena! Not only you countered my attack perfectly, but if this was a contest battle, it would have made me lose a lot of points!"

Ash praised her.

"Really? That's great!" Serena beamed. "Maybe I'm not that bad at battles after all!"

"Braixen!" the Fox Pokemon added, sounding as happy as her trainer.

Ash's lips curved into a smirk, as a mischevious glint flashed across his auburn eyes. "Feeling confident, huh? Well, in that case, you won't mind if I take things up a notch!"

"Bring it on!" Serena said.

"Gible, Draco Meteor!"

"WHAT!?" Serena asked, her face growing pale. Serena had only seen such attack a couple times, first when Grant's Tyrunt used it during Ash's battle for the Cliff Badge, and more recently at the Kalos League. That was an attack that she would never forget. "A little guy like Gible can use that move?"

"It took him a while to master it, but you'll see!" Ash proudly said.

Gible's body started to glow orange. Opening his jaws, he spat a glowing energy ball of the same color into the air. Once it was high enough, it exploded into multiple fiery shards that rained down towards Braixen.

"Braixen, counter it with Hidden Power!" Serena ordered.

Trying to rein her panic in, Braixen once again summoned several rainbow colored orbs, before launching each of them towards the coming meteors, destroying them before they could touch the ground. Unfortunately, the meteors doubled the energy spheres in number, and many of them managed to land around Braixen, and the Fox Pokemon was engulfed by a series of explosions caused by the sucessive impacts.

"Braixen!" Serena cried.

When the clouds of smoke and dirt raised by the explosions began to fade, Serena could see that the powerful Dragon-type attack had made a number on her starter. Her body was trembling, there were numerous burnt marks around her fur, and she was breathing heavily.

"Braixen can you... can you continue?" Serena worriedly asked.

"Br-Braixen..." the Fox Pokemon nodded, as she pushed herself back to her feet.

"Such a powerful attack... what I'm supposed to do against something like that?" Serena asked.

"Every attack can be countered, Serena. I know it may look like you have nothing, but if you-"

Ash was interrupted by a crackling sound, followed by Gible's body glowing white and blue. Gible's body then started to grow, becoming taller and more slender, his stubby arms and legs also growing longer, and a tail extending on the back of his body. The glow ceased, and Gible had turned into a completely new Pokemon.

"Gible, you evolved!" Ash cried in joy. "That's so awesome!"

"Gabite!" the new Pokemon cried.

Wordlessly, Serena pulled out her Pokedex to scan the new evolution.

" Gabite, the Land Shark Pokemon, and Gible's evolution. As it digs to expand its nest, it habitually digs up gems that it then hoards in its nest."

"Ummm, Ash? Do you mind if we end the battle here?" Serena asked, rubbing her arm. "Gible already gave Braixen quite a lot of

trouble, so I don't think we have any chances now that he has evolved."

"Oh, um, sure!" Ash said. "That Draco Meteor must hurt more than I imagined."

"Indeed. Return, Braixen." Serena said, returning her starter. "Don't worry, you did fine. We'll do better next time."

"For all it's worth, I think you and Braixen were great. Right Pikachu?" Ash asked.

"Pi-Pika!" the yellow rodent happily cheered, giving Serena a thumbs up.

One thing Serena had learned from this battle is that Ash always seemed to plan multiple steps ahead of her, while also guessing what would be her next move. Tactics went beyond simply knowing what attacks use against which rivals. A Pokemon battle took place first in the mind of the trainers before it did on the battleground.

Also, even if one plans ahead of time, said plans didn't come out as intended. "Man plans, Arceus laughs", as the old saying went. Ash, however, was really good at thinking on his feet, coming up with solutions to problems that appeared less than two seconds ago. And Serena will need to think just as fast if she wanted to be a successful coordinator.

"Thank you guys, but I know that I still need to do much better than that," Serena admitted.

"So... do you want to call it a day? Or do you want to continue with your other Pokemon?" Ash asked. "I think Sylveon would do great against Gabite, given that she's Fairy-type."

"Alright, let's give it another try. Sylveon, go!"

And thus the battle resumed.

...

For the next few days, the group fell onto a comfortable routine. Ash and Serena would go to Professor Oak's ranch to train, Bonnie would go with them in order to get to know and play with Ash's Pokemon roaming there, while Clemont would work on his inventions. All of them would gather to have lunch and dinner, and share what they had been doing during the day.

That's it, until a certain day, their status quo would be altered, and a new road would be laid before them. It began a couple hours after Ash, Serena and Bonnie had left for Oak's, when somebody knocked the door.

"Coming~!" Delia chirped, as she walked to the door before opening it. There stood a man in a formal suit, looking like some sort of important businessman, the kind of people Pallet Town rarely saw. "Yes? May I help you?"

"Greetings, Ma'am. My name is Timothy Glenn, and I work for Orangics," the man introduced himself, and handed Delia a card with information about the company he worked for, which appeared to be about robotics. "I'm looking for a boy named Clemont. He's the leader of Lumiose City Pokemon Gym in Kalos, but I was told he's staying here for the time being."

"Oh, um, sure thing, Mr. Glenn," Delia said, moving aside so the man could enter. "Wait a second before I go fetch Clemont."

A few minutes later, Clemont was sitting in front of Mr. Glenn on the kitchen table, with Delia pouring some tea for the two of them, before filling a cup for herself, and taking a seat between them.

"So, Mr. Glenn, is it?" Clemont asked. "Mrs. Ketchum said that you were looking for me, and that you're from Orangics."

While Clemont knew about the name, he had the feeling that the brand had more significance to him than he remembered, though

now he couldn't tell exactly why.

"Indeed. I'm sure you probably heard of us, given your more than evident interest in engineering and electronics," Mr. Glenn began. "I'll be direct: Orangics is currently undertaking a new project involving nuclear power plants in the Tandor region, and we'd like to have you be part of such project, Clemont."

If Clemont had been drinking the tea at that moment, he would have spat it. "M-Me? Working for Orangics? Really!?"

Mr. Glenn smiled, and chuckled. "You sound surprised. Given your your accomplishments, it is that incredible that a bussiness in this kind of field would be interested in having you?"

"Aww, don't be so humble, Clemont! I've only known you for a few days, yet I can tell what a bright and talented boy you are," Delia encouraged.

"I see..." Clemont said, before adjusting his glasses. "And what kind of project are we talking about? You mentioned nuclear plants?"

"Yes. I don't know if you hear about the incident, given that it was almost a decade ago, but there was an accident on one of Tandor's power plants that left it unusable," Mr. Glenn began, with Clemont nodding. He had heard of the accident, but he didn't remember when it happened. "Now, they're bulding a new plant to replace the one that was lost. This one will be better and more advanced, and most importantly, safer and cleaner. For such endeavor, we're gathering the best and brightest minds when it comes to all technological fields. One of our members suggested to hire you, and after reviewing your resume, we couldn't agree more. So, what do you say, Clemont? Can we count on you?"

"Of course! I-It will be a great honor, sir!" Clemont excitedly said, feeling like Bonnie on a sugar rush.

"The project is already underway, so the sooner you head to Tandor, the better," Mr. Glenn said. "South of this town there's a port named Old Shore Wharf. You can take a ship from there that will take you to Tandor. I'll be heading back to Tandor myself as well, and tell my bosses that you're in and to expect you shortly. Though I assume that you'd like a day or two to pack your things before you depart for Tandor."

"Yeah... oh, wait, I need to tell my friends! And Bonnie! She'd probably want to come with me, but there's no way I can keep her close while working on a power plant," Clemont began to ramble.

"I'm sure they're still at Professor Oak's lab, training," Delia told him.

Upon hearing this, Mr. Glenn, who was about to leave the house, turned around, and added: "You know, if your friends are Pokemon trainers, you might tell them to visit Tandor, given that there's a Pokemon League there as well."

"There is?" Clemont asked, already imagining Ash's reaction. "In that case, I'm sure he's going to want to come as well!"

...

Professor Oak's Lab

Clemont ran towards the lab as fast as he could -but had to stop midway to catch his breath due his poor physical shape. When he arrived, one of Professor Oak's assistants, a boy named Tracey, directed him towards the back, where Ash and Serena usually trained. Clemont found them sparring, Serena using Pancham, and Ash using a small, snake-like green Grass-type Pokemon that later he would learn was called Snivy, and told them about his new job in Tandor, as well as the Tandor Pokemon League.

Needless to say, Ash was excited by the prospect of tackling yet another league.

Ash suggested to talk with Professor Oak about the Tandor region, in order to see if the old scientist had anything interesting to say about the region.

"The region of Tandor, you say?" Oak asked, as he sat in front of one of the lab's computers and, after typing a few keys, opened a website with information about the region. "Funny thing you ask, given that one of my undergrads, or better said, former undergrad, Ernest Bamb'o, recently became a Pokemon Professor and opened a lab there. You know, you should pay him a visit once you get there."

"Look at that!" Ash said, looking at a section that boasted about all the Pokemon unique to Tandor. "So many Pokemon that can't be found anywhere! And it says that it has one of the hardest Gym Challenges!"

"So I take you're interested in going?" Clemont asked, chuckling a little.

"You bet!" Ash replied. "Those gyms won't know what hit them when we fight them! Right, Pikachu?"

"Pi-Pikachu!" the Electric type confidently cheered.

"Yay! We're going to Tandor!" Bonnie squealed, jumping up and down.

"Nenene!" Dedenne cheered as well, even if he didn't know what they were cheering for.

"No, Bonnie, *Ash and I* are going to Tandor. You'll be going back to Lumiose with dad," Clemont strenly said.

"What?" Bonnie asked, dumbfounded.

"Nene?" Dedenne asked as well, sensing his trainer's confusion.

"But... why not!?" the blond girl protested, clenching her fists and pouting.

"I'm not going there to travel, but to work on a power plant. That place is way too dangerous for a child like you, not to mention that I can't work while keeping an eye on you," Clemont explained.

"Hey Clemont, if you're worried about Bonnie, she can come with me," Ash offered.

"What?" Clemont asked.

"You would!?" Bonnie cheered, her hopes of visiting a new region renewed. She looked at Clemont with pleading eyes. "Please say yes, big bro! I won't get in any trouble if I'm with Ash!"

"That's true, but..." the inventor began, rubbing the back of his head. "Bonnie can be a real handful, and I don't want to impose-"

"You won't be imposing anything. Bonnie is my friend as much as you and Serena are. Plus, I'd have somebody to talk to. I love my Pokemon, but I can't imagine not traveling with another human being," Ash assured.

"Well, if you don't mind... guess there's no harm in letting Bonnie come," Clemont finally admitted.

"YES!" Bonnie shouted, before tackling Ash in a hug. "Thank you Ash, you're the best!"

"It's so great that you guys get to travel for longer a little more," Serena, who had been silent for most of the conversation, finally said.

This seemed to snap Bonnie out of her joyous mood. "What do you mean, Serena? Are't you going to come with us?"

The possibility was tempting but... what was she supposed to do, once she arrived on Tandor? Be a mere tag-along like she was

during the beginning of their Kalos journey? Become Ash's cheerleader? Become Bonnie's babysitter when Ash was too busy to look after her?

No. Sure, delaying her journey to Hoenn in order to spend a few more days with Ash was one thing, but going to an entirely different region and do nothing just because she wanted to be with Ash -and Clemont and Bonnie, she reminded herself- wasn't something she could allow herself to do. As much as it pained her, it was time to say goodbye for the time being.

Serena finally shook her head. "I'm afraid not, Bonnie. My path takes me somewhere else."

"What? Why?" Bonnie protested.

"Serena also has to follow her own dreams. In order to achieve her goals, somebody recommended Serena to go to Hoenn in order to take part in Pokemon Contests," Ash gently explained. Bonnie had heard of Contests a couple times, being similar to Kalos' own Performances. "It's not that Serena doesn't want to come with us, but sometimes, you need to say goodbye to your friends in order to follow the path ahead of you. I myself had to say goodbye to plenty of friends for similar reasons."

Bonnie didn't say anything. It pained her that Serena wouldn't come with them, but no matter how much she wanted, she couldn't refute Ash's words. After all, Bonnie wasn't a stranger to goodbyes. Even if they didn't become any easier.

Fortunately for Bonnie, the solution would come from Professor Oak.

"If that's a problem, maybe you should know that Tandor has contests as well," Professor Oak said, as he scrolled down the website, and highlighted a certain section.

"It does?" Serena asked, surprised by this new revelation. She rushed towards the computer as well, and scanned the screen until

she found the highlighted section that talked about contest. And indeed, Contests were also big in Tandor as well, to the point that one of its toughest Gym Leaders was also a Top Coordinator.

"Well, makes sense. Hoenn might be the region that pioneered contests, but a lot of regions hosts them, such as Sinnoh, Johto, or even Kanto itself," Ash commented.

"See? If you go to Tandor with us, you can do Contests as well! I mean, it's not that you *have* to go to Hoenn, right?" Bonnie asked.

This... this changed everything! Now Serena could stay with her friends and follow Palermo's suggestion!

Trying to make the volcano of joy erupting inside her heart not too obvious, Serena merely smiled and said: "If that's the case, then I don't see why I couldn't go with you guys."

"YES! The gang's complete once again!" Bonnie cheered, pumping her fist into the air.

"I'm glad you're going to stay with us, Serena," Ash began, smiling at her. "It wouldn't be the same without you."

Serena couldn't help but smile back at him.

...

Team Rocket HQ, Undisclosed Location

The trio of Team Rocket agents Jessie, James and Meowth were standing in front of their boss, Giovanni, sitting on his desk inside his spacious office. They enjoyed a few days of rest after their mission on Kalos, but now, it was time to get back to work, and the Team Rocket Boss already had a new target for the trio.

"This," Giovanni began, pressing a button on his desk. An holographic projector displayed the image of a map of a region the trio was unfamiliar with, being made of land to the west and an

archipelago to the east. "Is the Tandor region. From what our scouts reported, the region has many Pokemon that can't be found anywhere else, but that's not the reason I want you three to go there. There's also-"

The phone began to ring, making Giovanni flinch, and the trio of agents to gulp. They knew if there was something their boss hated, was being interrupted.

"I told Matori not to pass me any calls when I'm briefing agents," Giovanni growled, before picking up the phone. "This better be important," he said, sounding almost like a threat. "WHAT!?" Giovanni's yell made the trio startle once again. Whatever Matori told him, they weren't good news. "And how many...? But that's almost half of them! No, no, tell that idiot not to do anything! I'll be sending them reinforcements." and with that, he hung the phone.

"Uh, boss? Everything's okay?" Jessie dared to ask.

He glared at her as if she asked something extremely stupid. "No, it isn't. Matori just told me our cell in Sinnoh had been compromised, with almost half of our field agents there being arrested. If our operations in Sinnoh are to continue, I need to send more people there to replace those who had been taken away."

Before Jessie or her teammates could say anything else, Giovanni then opened his laptop, and began to type something.

"According to your files, you've been in Sinnoh before," Giovanni read. He then narrowed his eyes at the screen, before shooting the trio a questioning look. "An... inordinate amount of time, might I add."

The trio gulped once again, as a feeling of dread grasped their very souls. Officially, they were the ones who took down Team Galactic, but deep down they knew that was a lie and it was all the twerps' doing. If their boss realized that they falsified their reports...

"... y-yes?" Meowth weakly confirmed.

"Then I imagine you're familiar with the region?" Giovanni asked.

Sensing that they were no longer on thin ice, James spoke up: "Yes sir! We know the region like the back of our hands!"

"Good because I need agents that know the zone. You'll depart for Sinnoh immediately. Your contact will be waiting for you at Veilstone City," Giovanni told them.

"Right away, sir!" James obediently said.

"Uh, boss? What about the Tandor mission?" Jessie asked.

"The Tandor mission is shelved for the time being. Now go!" Giovanni ordered.

Not needed to be told twice, the bumbling trio rushed out of Giovanni's office. The Team Rocket Boss then took one last look at the hologram of Tandor, sighed in defeat, and switched it off.

It seemed that fate didn't want Team Rocket to set its foot on Tandor.

...

Pallet Town, next day

Packed and ready for their newest adventure, Ash and his friends were at the edge of Pallet Town, with Delia Ketchum and Professor Oak about to see them off.

"Good luck, sonny. I'm sure you'll win the league this time," Oak encouraged. Ash. Then he looked at Serena. "And good luck to you with your contests as well!"

"Thank you, Professor Oak!" the two of them said in unison, before looking at each other in surprise, and sharing a laugh.

"I already gave Bamb'o a call, so he'll be expecting you. Be sure to pay him a visit once you arrive at Moki Town," Oak added.

"Will do," Ash replied.

"Also, be sure to call me once you get there, to know you arrived safely," Delia began.

"Don't worry, mom, I will," Ash insisted.

"And please, call me more often! I hardly heard from you on Kalos, and I'd like to know how were you doing," Delia continued.

"Sorry mom, I promise to call you more often this time," Ash assured.

This made Serena wonder if she should call her mother more often as well.

Delia smiled. "That's what I wanted to hear," she then gave Ash a hug. "Have a safe journey, and lots of luck."

"Thanks a lot, mom," Ash replied, before he gently broke the hug. He then turned towards his friends. "Ready to go, guys?"

All of them nodded, and the group of four finally departed Pallet Town, with Ash sighing in relief that just this time, his mother didn't embarrass him by loudly reminding him to change his underwear every day.

"Oh I almost forgot!" Delia shouted. "Make sure you change your underwear every day!"

Ash's fell to the ground facefirst. Spoke too soon.

...

As the group made their way towards Old Shore Warf, they didn't realize that there was somebody following them. Somebody quick and stealthy, who could have remained undetected had he chose to

do so. But once he was close to them, he decided to make his presence known by deliberately making some noise.

"Huh?" Ash asked. "Did you guys hear that?"

"Yeah, it sounded like something was rustling the trees," Clemont replied.

"A pokemon?" Bonnie asked.

Bonnie was right, of course, but neither she nor the others were expecting said pokemon to be no other than Ash's Greninja, who landed in front of them with all the grace and skill of the spies his species were named after.

"Greninja? What are you doing here?" Ash asked, taken aback to see the first Pokemon he ever caught in Kalos.

"What's on Greninja's hand?" Serena asked, noticing the item Greninja was holding on his right hand.

If on cue, Greninja lifted his arm at Ash, showing that he was holding his own pokeball.

Ash and Greninja locked eyes, and through their unique bond, Ash could sense what Greninja was feeling: Disappointment, not in Ash but in himself. Dissatisfaction. Frustration. The desire to do better and prove his worth. It didn't take Ash long to realize what the Ninja Pokemon wanted.

"You were disappointed that we couldn't win the Kalos League, after we got so close to victory," it wasn't a question, but a statement.

"And you want another chance."

"Gre," the blue frog confirmed.

Ash finally averted his gaze, for a brief moment his eyes became obscured by the visor of his cap. But once they were visible again, Ash smiled widely.

"You only needed to ask, Greninja," Ash said, before taking the pokeball from Greninja's hand, and returning the Ninja Pokemon inside it. "Welcome back to the group."

Now that the group was truly complete, their newest adventure could finally begin.

Author's Note: And thus concludes the first chapter! I know, they haven't gotten to Tandor yet, but hey, setup is important, isn't it?

Thank goodness Serena's arc in the anime ended with her doing contests, because I don't think I'd have the energy or skill to write showcases (they're fine for the anime, but they translate really bad to a non-visual medium like writing).

And the Team Rocket Trio makes their debut! Also, say goodbye to the Team Rocket Trio, since that was their very last scene! Yeah, those who know me are aware how much I dislike them, and I wouldn't include in any story of mine not even at gunpoint. That scene wasn't even necessary, but I didn't want people asking if they're going to show up all the time, so hope that makes it clear. Sorry for the bait and switch, but I couldn't resist mocking how they're always oh-so-coincidentally sent to the same region Ash decides to visit next. Not this time!

And yeah, besides Pikachu, Ash takes Greninja with him, which, as you probably noticed, he wasn't released alongside Goodra at the end of this version of XY. I'm not including Greninja just because I like him, but because I felt that with his defeat at the League, his character arc was left incomplete, and his release felt very unearned. With this story, I hope to give Greninja the end his character arc deserved.

Next chapter, the heroes visit Tandor and we finally dig into the meat of the story. Now, what can you readers expect from this fanfic? Well:

-Plenty of Amourshippinng (obviously!)

-Mega Evolution. Lots of it.

-Pokemon can learn more than four moves (though there will still be a cap. Otherwise, it's hard to keep in mind which moves any Pokemon has at a certain moment)

-Unlike the anime, evolution and type matchups will matter. Don't expect to see stuff like a Yanma tanking a Thunder from Electivire, then beating said Electivire with a couple Quick Attacks.

-And, overall, an engaging, enjoyable and well written story (or so is my aim)

Anyway, I hope this first chapter made you want for more. Be sure to leave your thoughts in a Review, and see you next chapter!

Welcome to Tandor!

Author's Note: First of all, something I forgot to mention in the previous chapter, and that's the characters' ages. Needless to say, no, Ash and the others aren't ten. Time passes here. So Ash, Serena and Clemont are actually 15, while Bonnie is 9. With that out of the way, let's get to the chapter:

Chapter 2:

Welcome to Tandor!

Ten Years Ago

Today was a normal day for Doctor Lucille Raine. A day like any other.

She got up at seven o'clock sharp in the morning. Normally, her husband Kellyn would get up about the same time as her in order to go to work, but since their kids were born, he decided to take a paternity leave in order to take care of them. Not only did Lucille's job brought more money home, but Kellyn knew how much Lucille loved her job, which how much she gushed about the project she was working on at the Nuclear Power Plant, even if she couldn't share many details with him for professional reasons, so he took the responsibility of looking after the babies while Lucille continued her work.

Giving her still sleeping husband a kiss on the cheek, Lucille went to bathroom in order to get herself ready for the day. She looked at the mirror, and a woman of thirty years of age with bright green hair that flared up to the sides returned the gaze.

She then got dressed, and took the ship that would take her to the island where her workplace was located at: Nuclear Plant Epsilon,

one of Tandor's three power plants.

Though, once she reached the power plant, the sight of a man with bright red hair with a yellow stripe crossing it told them that this day wasn't going to be just like any other. A man he knew to well.

" Cameron!" Lucille said, smiling widely, as she walked towards the man.

" Hey there, Lucille," the man, Cameron, replied, smiling back.

Cameron Cain was a longtime friend of her husband. A former trainer who retired in order to become a family man, he took the job of nuclear technician, whose job was to inspect the power plants and ensure they met all the safety expectations. And upon meeting him, he quickly became a close friend of her as well. Like Lucille and Kellyn, Cameron had become a father recently as well. He named his son Theo.

" What are you doing here? Another inspection?" Lucille asked. "Not that I mind seeing you, but I wasn't expecting you to show at least in four months!"

" Eh, you know, the higher ups. They have this idea that there's some irregular activity going on, and are worried about the plant's safety," Cameron explained.

Lucille couldn't help but roll their eyes. "You'd think they'd have more trust in me by know."

" I know. Unfortunately, I'm paid to follow their orders, not to question them," Cameron said, somewhat apologizing. "Don't worry, I promise I'll be as swift as possible. You won't even notice I'm here."

" Hey, I love having you here," Lucille insisted. "Anyway, how's Theo doing?"

The two of them continued to talk as they went to do their jobs. But while Lucille wasn't lying when she said that she loved seeing Cameron, she had a bad feeling that there was something more to his impromptu visit than a bunch of politicians getting ansty. Feeling that amplified when his inspection began to take longer than they usually did.

Upon walking by the main reactor's control room, Lucille saw Cameron still there, typing furiously on one of the computres, his eyes fixed on the screen. Unable to contain her impatience, fueled by the gnawing thought on the back of her head that something was going very wrong, she entered the room, and walked towards him.

" Cameron, have you finished your diagnostics?" she asked.

Cameron typed a few more times before giving his answer. "Yes, just now. I checked and double checked and... everything seems to be in order."

Lucille smiled, a little relief making way through her heart. "See? I keep my power plant in pristine condition."

Yet, there was something in Cameron's voice that made her on edge. Like... disappointment? Like he was trying to find something that wasn't really there.

" Indeed. That new reactor is a technological wonder," Cameron said.

" Of course it is! I created it!" Lucille said, puffing her chest a little. "So, I take you're done?"

" Yeah," he replied.

" Excellent. Though, before you leave, how about if we have lunch together at the plant's cafeteria?" Lucille suggested. "I'd love if we could catch up. With our jobs and families we hardly see each other these days."

" Sure I'd love-" Cameron was interrupted by a beep coming from the computer terminal. "Huh?"

" Something wrong?" she asked.

" These temperature readings... they were normal not even a minute ago, but they're steadily rising," Cameron said, as worry crept up his voice.

" That can't be right," Lucille said, as she went to check another computer terminal. "Maybe the thermometer is malfunctioning?"

" That can't be. I just checked the thermometer and it worked fine," Cameron replied, sounding more shaken.

" Then what-"

There was a loud boom, and the whole place shook as if it was in the epicenter of an earthquake. Red lights began to flash across the whole plant as a loud alarm blared.

" What's going on!?" Cameron asked.

" T-The reactor! There must be a breach in the reactor!" Lucille said, as she continued to type on her computer, in order to check for possible damage. "The temprature keeps rising! If I don't stop it, we'll have a total meltdown!"

" Then we need to evacuate, NOW!" Cameron shouted, as he got up from his seat, ready to leave as soon as possible.

But Lucille didn't move from her seat.

" Lucille, what are you doing? Come on, we need to leave!" the man insisted, standing on the room's entry.

" You leave. I need to stay here and stop it. If there's a meltdown, the consequences would be catastrophic," Lucille stated, her voice filled

with determination, before getting up from her chair and walking towards Cameron.

"Have you gone insane? It's too late to stop it-HEY!" Cameron shouted as Lucille pushed him out of the control room, and locked the door closed. Cameron began to angrily pound on the closed steel door. "Lucille! Lucille! What the hell are you doing!?"

"What I must do. I'm sorry, Cameron," Lucille mournfully said. "If I don't come back... tell my husband and children that I love them."

With that, Lucille walked towards the main control panel, and activated a hidden switch beneath it. A trapdoor opened with a hiss, revealing a series of step irons that lead somewhere below. Taking a deep breath, Lucille climbed down, as the trapdoor closed above her a minute later.

Sometime later, there was a nuclear meltdown, and the power plant blew up. Thankfully, all the workers were evacuated in time, so there were no human casualties. Except, of course, Lucille, who never returned from wherever she went, and was presumed dead.

...

Present Day

The boat trip to Tandor was both long and uneventful, and the group was glad that they were finally able to touch land once again. And they were even more glad that they would only need to walk a short distance from the port towards their first stop, Moki Town, where, according to Oak, Professor Bamb'o was waiting for them.

They didn't have to wait long until could finally see the town in the distance. While he was doing an admirable job keeping it on check, Ash was eventually overpowered by his impatience, and rushed madly towards the town in front of him.

"Ash, where are you going?" Serena asked.

"Don't you see? Moki Town is just there! Come on guys!" Ash said, his voice overflowing with excitement.

They had no choice but to run after Ash -much to Clemont's displeasure- until they arrived at the aforementioned town. A sign welcomed them.

Welcome to Moki Town

The Town of Fresh Beginnings!

"Uh, that's oddly appropriate," Serena said out loud after reading the tagline under the welcome message.

Now that they had finally arrived at their destination, Ash managed to calm down a little, and the group began to walk through the town, taking in the sights as they moved.

Moki Town was pretty small, but it had a feeling of cozyness and warmth only matched by Pallet Town. Most of the houses were small, no bigger than two stories. The town roads were flanked by either trees, or bogs that had beautiful flowers growing on them.

There were three places that stood out the most: the first was a park in the middle of the town, next to a pond. At the east side of the town was a large, colorful building that Ash immediately identified as a Contest Hall. And lastly, a large building next to a ranch built on the top of a small cliff at the far end of the town.

"That must be where Professor Bamb'o's laboratory is," Clemont deduced. "We should be heading there."

"Shouldn't we go to the Pokemon Center first? So I can sign up for the Pokemon League and Serena for the contests?" Ash asked. "I mean, there's a Contest Hall there! There might be a contest today!"

"I find that unlikely. There's still a few days until Contest Season begins," Serena pointed out. "We can go to the Pokemon Center

later. I'm sure Professor Bamb'o is waiting for us, and it'd be rude to keep him waiting longer than needed."

"Okaaaaaay..." Ash conceded.

It only took them less than ten minutes of walking at a good pace to finally reach the laboratory. Bonnie immediately rushed towards the fence of the ranch, hoping to see cute Pokemon, but much to her disappointment, the ranch was completely empty.

"Where are all the Pokemon?" the little girl complained. "Aren't Pokemon Professors supposed to have many Pokemon to study? Both Professor Sycamore and Oak had lots of them!"

"Professor Oak said that Bamb'o just became a Pokemon Professor, so maybe he didn't have time to catch any," Clemont conjectured, before gently pulling Bonnie away from the fence. "Come on, let's get inside."

They entered the main lab, and what saw them seemed to validate Clemont's suggestion: rather than a neat lab with lots of machinery, electronics, essay tubes and other scientific tools one might find at a laboratory, the place was a mess: there were lots of boxes and crates, some unopened, others still closed, scattered around the place. Lots of long cables were spread around the floor, making walking without stepping on them a difficult affair. There were some technicians installing computers and other devices most of them didn't have any idea what they were for.

And directing the technicians was a man in his early thirties with spiky black hair, strangely dressed in a green and yellow hoodie, blue shorts, and sandals. A pair of sunglasses were resting on the top of his head. Upon seeing them, the man smiled and walked towards them, doing his best to avoid the cables on the floor.

"Oh, it's you guys! Welcome, welcome!" the strange man said. "So, you're the kids that came for the jobs aren't you? Sorry for the mess, but you guys arrived sooner than expected. Hmmm... I thought you

were only three. And aren't you a little young to be a Pokemon trainer?" the man asked, looking at Bonnie.

"Job? What job?" Ash asked, looking confused. What was this man talking about?

"You know, field research assistant? You're supposed to go out there to catch Pokemon for me to study?" the man asked, as if he was saying something obvious. He crossed his arms as a frown developed on his face. "What are you doing here then?"

"Professor Oak told us to come here and meet Professor Bamb'o. Do you know where he is?" Serena asked.

"Professor Oak...?" the man asked, before suddenly slapped his forehead. "OF COURSE! You are the *other* kids, right? The kid from Pallet Town and the kids from Kalos!" the man said, as a sense of ease set among the gang now that they've been acknowledged. "Man, I totally forgot about you guys. As you can see, we're quite busy and stressed, and I may not be at my best."

"That's... okay. Now if we could talk with Professor Bamb'o..." Ash said, trying not to sound rude.

"But you're already talking with him!" the man replied, grinning a little. "Professor Ernest Bamb'o at your service! Yes, yes, I know, I don't look much like a Pokemon Professor, I get that a lot. It's the lack of a white coat? Sorry, but I hate those coats, they're so..." he shivered as he made a grunt of annoyance. "Anyway, follow me. Again, sorry for this mess. I just finished my thesis a few months ago and I'm in the process of setting my lab. Say are you guys interested in becoming a Pokemon Professor?"

"Eh-"

"You totally shouldn't! You have to study and work a lot and spend your best years while everybody else is having fun! And when you finally get your license and get to work, is a constant battle to get

enough funding!" Bamb'o rambled as he led the group to another room. "Anyway, here we are!"

They arrived to a room that appeared to be Bamb'o's personal office. Unlike the rest of the lab, it was much more tidy. There was a large wooden desk in the middle with a computer on top of it. There were shelves resting against the left and right walls filled with books and folders of many sizes and colors. On the wall behind the desk was a screen, and a projector hung from the ceiling.

"So, you guys are the kids Professor Oak told me about. Your names being...?" Bamb'o asked.

"Oh, right! I'm Ash Ketchum, and this is my partner, Pikachu!" Ash introduced himself.

"Pika-pi!" Pikachu greeted.

"I'm Serena," Serena said.

"And I'm Clemont, and this is my little sister Bonnie," Clemont said.

"And this is Dedenne!" Bonnie proudly said, showing the small electric and fairy type to the black haired man.

"So, do any of you guys have Pokedex? Because you might want me to upgrade them if you want them to be useful here," Bamb'o asked.

Wordlessly, Ash and Serena handed their Pokedex to the black haired man, who took them and connected them to his computer via a pair of cords, before typing something on his keyboard.

"Okay, the updating process might take a bit. Unfortunately, they don't give the best hardware to newbies like myself, I have to do with the outdated junk I'm given, so if you guys want to ask me something while we wait..."

"Now that you mention that, what's your specialty, professor?" Clemont asked.

"Pokemon Elements!" Bamb'o enthusiastically answered. "More commonly referred to Pokemon types. How they interact among each other. Why some Pokemon develop a certain types. Why some Pokemon gain a new type upon evolving, or completely replace their old type with a new one. Or my absolute favorite: why two Pokemon of the same species are of different types depending on their home region!"

"Wait, what?" Ash asked. "Come again?"

"Are you telling us that, for example, a Dedenne from another region wouldn't be Electric and Fairy, but something else?" Bonnie asked, looking at her partner curiously.

"Exactly! They're called regional variants, albeit not every region has them. In fact, that was the topic of my thesis. Look!" Bamb'o said, as he started to frantically type something on his computer.

The projector hanging from the ceiling beeped to life, and projected an image on the screen behind him, an image of three Pokemon. The one in the middle was a Meowth, a Pokemon they were very familiar with thanks to their constant runs with the Team Rocket Trio. To its left was another Meowth, except this one had grayish blue skin, and its feet and top of its tail was white. To the right was another version of Meowth, which was extremely furry, with a mouth full of sharp teeth, and its coin amulet being black instead of golden.

"You see, this is a common Meowth, found in many regions. But this one is a special Meowth only found in the region of Alola. It's typing is Dark rather than Normal. And this other Meowth, which is Steel type, can only be found on Galar. And that's not all!" Bamb'o explained, and before the gang had a chance to ask anything, he pressed a key, and the image changed from Meowth to Persian. Well, at least two of them looked like Persian; the other one was a bipedal feline with a bushy beard and horns sticking out of its head.

"While Alolan Meowth evolves into an Alolan Persian, Galarian Meowth evolves into a completely new Pokemon, Perrserker! Fascinating, isn't it?"

"Indeed!" Clemont said.

"Does Tandor has regional variant of Pokemon of other regions as well?" Ash asked, his mind filled with possibilities.

"Even better!" Bamb'o said, his excitement matching Ash. "You see, there are officially eighteen recognized types, but technically, there are nineteen. And Pokemon of said type can only be found here, in Tandor! You see-"

That moment, the door to his office opened, and one of the technicians walked in.

"Professor? A trio of kids have just arrived. They're asking for you," the technician informed.

"Oh, those must be my potential field research assistants!" Bamb'o said. He was about to get up, before something on his computer's screen caught his eye. "Oh look, your Pokedexes are already updated! In fact, they've been for some time. Anyway, there you go!" Bamb'o said, returning their updated Pokedex to Ash and Serena. "Not only did I update them with information about Tandorian Pokemon, but there's also data on Alolan and Galar Pokemon, should you run into somebody using them! Oh, and besides Pokemon, there's also plenty of information about other related topics, such as Gym Leaders, geography, and the like. Anyway, follow me!"

Bamb'o led the group back to the laboratory, where a new trio of teens were waiting for them. There were two boys and a girl, around three or four year younger than Ash and Serena, looking to be either eleven or twelve.

The girl had shoulder length light brown hair and blue eyes. She was wearing a red short sleeved hoodie, a brown skirt and red sneakers. There was a yellow fanny pack attached to her waist, and a white poofy cap covered her head. Next to her was a boy whose face was almost identical to hers. He had short brown hair and blue eyes, and was wearing a green striped short sleeved t-shirt, brown shorts with yellow trims, and blue sneakers. Unlike the girl, he was carrying a backpack.

The last of the trio was the one who stood out the most, and not just because of his bright red hair with a yellow stripe crossing it. The boy was wearing a white, short sleeved t-shirt with red sleeves and a yellow star in the middle, dark blue shorts and blue sneakers. He also appeared to have a way more restless disposition than the other two.

For some reason, that boy reminded Ash of Iris.

"And there you are!" Bamb'o greeted the new trio. "You must be Natalie, Vitor and... Tommy?"

The boy with the red and yellow hair frowned. "Honestly, pops, can't you even remember my name? It's Theo! Theo!"

"Come on Theo, don't get so mad just because he got your name wrong," the girl, Natalie, said with a roll of her eyes.

"Easy for you to say, he got your name right!" Theo protested.

"Come on guys, let's not have a fight today," the other boy, Vitor, said, getting in the way of the two.

Theo then noticed Ash's group, and his scowl returned. "Hey, who are those guys? You didn't give them the Pokemon you promised us, did you!?"

"What? No, of course not! These guys have come to Tador on behalf of my teacher, Professor Oak. They were already leaving,"

Bamb'o said, before turning at them. "... unless you want to stay and watch how my field research assistants get their first Pokemon? I mean, I don't think you guys had the chance to see a Pokemon native to Tandor, didn't you?"

"Yes! We'd love to!" Bonnie quickly replied.

"Nenene!" Dedenne added, sharing his trainer's joy.

"In that case, everyone, follow me!" Bamb'o said, as he lead the group of seven to yet another room of his lab. The new room was larger than his office, but appeared to be much more empty. There was a table with a large case resting on it, and a couple cabinets resting against the walls, but unlike the main lab or his office, there were no electronics.

Bamb'o then walked towards the large case, and opened it. He pulled three pokeballs, as well as three devices Ash guessed were Pokedexes.

"First of all, your Pokedex. A necessary tool for every trainer worth their salt. You'll find lots of useful information on Pokemon there, as well as many other applications. And now, what you guys have been expecting: these are the Pokemon Tandor trainers begin with: Orchynx, Raptorch and Eletux. Come out guys, and meet your new trainers!" Bamb'o said, tossing the three pokeballs, which released the Pokemon they were holding inside.

Bonnie couldn't help but let out a squee, while Ash and Serena pulled out their Pokedexes to scan the new Pokemon.

" Orchynx, the Kitten Pokemon. Grass/Steel. Metal plates underneath its fur protect it from harm. It replenishes its energy by basking in the sun's rays. "

The first Pokemon, Orchynx, was a dark green cat with light green stripes on its back and its forehead, as well as grey spots on its cheeks. Its eyes were closed all the time not unlike a Cyndaquil or

an Abra. It had metal rings around one of its forelegs, one of its hind legs, and its tail.

" Raptorch, the Fire Dino Pokemon. Fire/Ground. They are energetic Pokémon that require constant attention, or they will start setting their surroundings on fire."

Raptorch looked like a small bipedal theropod with black skin and a dull orange underbelly. It had two red shells, one on its back, the other on its head. A flame burned at the tip of its tail, similar to a Charmander.

" Eletux, the Hippocampus Pokemon. Water/Electric. Eletux is capable of generating strong magnetic fields around its feet and tail that allow it to walk on water."

Eletux, the last of the starters, was a blue skinned quadruped whose head looked like that of an equine. Its body had two yellow lightning-shaped marks running around its sides. It had four tails, three of them extremely short, and the fourth one much longer, all of them having yellow bulbs at their tips.

"They're so cute! If I had to chose one between the three of them I don't think I could," Bonnie said.

"Well kids, time to choose your first partner!" Bamb'o said, clapping his hands together. "Say, why don't you go first, Natalie? Ladies first and all that."

"Thank you, professor," Natalie said, before taking a step forward, and started to inspect the three Pokemon before her.

"But I wanted to choose first!" Theo protested.

"Don't be so impatient, Theo. There will be Pokemon for all of you," Bamb'o tried to reassure.

"I made my choice! I want Raptorch!" Natalie said.

"Rap!" Raptorch cheered upon being the first to be chosen.

"Excellent choice!" Bamb'o said, before returning Raptorch to its pokeball and handing it to Natalie. "I'm sure you two will go on doing great things!"

"Hey, no fair! I wanted to choose Raptorch!" Theo protested. "It's clearly the cooler of the three!"

"Come on Theo, don't say that. All Pokemon are cool in their own way," Ash said, taking a step forward. "I'm sure the other two Pokemon are just as great as Raptorch."

"Who are you to lecture me? I bet that you got the starter you wanted when you became a trainer!" Theo angrily retorted.

"Not in the slightest. Not only I didn't get the starter I wanted, but I overslept, and when I arrived to the lab to get my Pokemon, all of them had already been claimed, so I had to do with what Professor Oak could give me, and he gave me this Pikachu," Ash explained. "At first we didn't get along and he refused to obey me. But we eventually bonded, and became best of friends. Now I can't imagine being a Pokemon Trainer without Pikachu by my side."

"Pikachu!" the yellow rodent cheerfully agreed.

"Yeah, don't be such a kid, Theo. Come on, you can go and choose next. I'll take the Pokemon you don't choose," Vitor offered.

Theo grumbled something unintelligible as he walked towards the two remaining Pokemon. After tasking a good look at the two of them, he pointed at Orchynx.

"Alright, that one then," Theo said.

"So, if Orchynx goes to Theo, then Vitor gets Eletux!" Bamb'o said, before returning the two remaining Pokemon to their pokeballs and

handing them to their new trainers. "Congratulations! You're officially now Pokemon trainers!"

"Hey, I have an idea! Let's test our Pokemon with a battle!" Natalie suggested.

"But how are we going to do it, sis? We're three," Vitor pointed out.

"Ummmm..." the brown haired girl began to ponder. "You vs me and whoever wins vs Theo?"

"But then Theo is going to have the advantage because he's going to be fighting with a fresh Pokemon," Vitor countered.

"How about a two vs two?" Ash suggested. "You two versus me and Theo! What do you say?"

"Are you sure, Ash? You're way more experienced than them. It would be quite the lopsided match," Bamb'o warned.

"Don't worry, I know how to hold back when I'm fighting against a beginner," Ash reassured the professor. He then looked at Clemont. "Clemont, will you referee?"

"Sure, you don't need to ask," the inventor replied.

A few minutes later, everybody moved to the ranch at the back of the lab. Since it was empty, it was the perfect spot for a match. Vitor and Natalie were on one side, and Ash and Theo on the other, with Clemont in the middle.

"This will be a two versus two battle with no time limit. Each trainer will use one Pokemon each. The team will win when both Pokemon of the other side can't fight anymore. Trainers, send your Pokemon!" Clemont shouted.

"To time to kick ass, Raptorch!"

"Come out and play, Eletux!"

"Let's go, Orchynx!"

"Pikachu, I choose you!"

"Let the battle begin!" Clemont said, making a downward chopping motion with his hand.

~Ash (Pikachu) & Theo (Orchynx) VS Natalie (Raptorch) & Vitor (Eletux)~

"Alright Theo, do you want to make the first move?" Ash asked. He wasn't planning to overshadow Theo or the twins. This battle was for their sake after all.

"Indeed! Orchynx, use Metal Claw on Eletux!" Theo ordered.

"Chynx!" the Kitten Pokemon meowed, as it dashed forward towards one of his opponents, preparing his claws for the attack.

"Not if I have something to say about it! Raptorch stop it with Ember!" Natalie ordered.

"Ra-Rap!" Raptorch said, as it gathered fire inside his mouth, before opening it and releasing several small fireballs.

The fireballs hit the Grass-type feline squarely, stopping his attack on its tracks, causing him to meow in pain.

"Orchynx, no!" Theo cried upon seeing his starter in pain.

Vitor decided it was the time to intervene. "Eletux, follow up with Thundershock!"

However, so did Ash. "Pikachu, intercept that Thundershock with Electroball!"

The bulbs of Eletux's four tails started to crackle with electricity, before releasing several yellow bolts at the pained cat, while Pikachu charged a ball of electricity on the tip of his tail, before sending it to

the coming attack. Both electric attacks clashed against each other, producing a bright blast.

"Nice save, Ash!" Bamb'o cheered.

"He didn't need to save us, everything's under control!" Theo said, before pulling up his Pokedex. "What other moves can Orchynx use...? Oh, this one looks good! Orchynx, Vine Whip on Eletux!"

"Theo, wait-" Ash said, but too late.

A pair of whips emerged from Orchynx's sides, and shot towards the Water/Electric Pokemon.

"Repel them with Thundershock!" Vito ordered.

"Tux!" Eletux cried in affirmation, sending another bolt of electricity towards the coming whips, pushing them away.

"And to make sure that that Pikachu doesn't get in the way, Raptorch, Mud Slap!" Natalie ordered.

"Dodge it with Quick Attack!" Ash countered.

The Fire Dino Pokemon turned around and started to kick up clumps of mud towards Ash's Pokemon. Pikachu, however, blitzed forward and used his speed to constantly zigzag, dodging the Ground-type move, before slamming headfirst into Raptorch.

"Nat!" Vitor cried in distress, upon seeing his sister's Pokemon taking such a hit.

"Don't worry about Raptorch! Focus on the battle!" Natalie chastised.

"Yeah, listen to your sister," Theo said, as he put his Pokedex back on his pocket. "Orchynx, Leech Seed on Eletux!"

"Counter it with Water Gun!" Vitor ordered.

Orchynx opened his mouth, and fired a salvo of malignant seeds that were quickly pushed away by Eletux firing a stream of water from his mouth.

"Theo, stop!" Ash shouted. "You can't just throw attacks at random without rhythm nor reason! If you fight like that, all you'll accomplish is having your Pokemon defeated!"

"Just because you've been trainer for longer than I am doesn't mean that you can tell me what to do! You're no boss of me!" the redhead fired back.

"I'm not trying to boss you, just advice you!" Ash replied, matching Theo's anger. "And yes, you'd do good if you bothered to listen somebody who has been a trainer far longer than you!"

Meanwhile, on the sidelines, Serena, Bonnie and Bamb'o couldn't help but notice the heated discussion Ash and Theo got into.

"Geez, what's the problem with that guy?" Bonnie asked.

"Well, Theo has always been a... complicated kid," Bamb'o began. "He has always competed with the twins, and rarely, if ever, beat them at anything, be either grades or sports. He feels the need to prove he's better than them. Add to that his rather impatient nature and..."

"You have somebody who acts rashly without thinking first," Serena finished. She sighed a little. "Ash told me he used to be like that when he started his Pokemon journey. Maybe all Theo needs is a little guidance and experience..."

Back to the battlefield, Ash and Theo continued with their argument.

"Alright smartass! What would you have me do, given that you know sooooo much about Pokemon fights?" Theo fired.

"Given that their Pokemon have advantage of range over yours, maybe you should let them attack first, try to dodge, and then counterattack when they're wide open," Ash replied, lowering his voice so the twins wouldn't hear his strategy, his anger subduing a little now that Theo appeared to finally be listening.

Theo weighed in Ash's words, before raising an eyebrow. He then averted Ash's gaze and directed it to the battlefield. "Alright, let's do it your way."

"Good. First, I'll goad them. When you see the chance, have Orchynx use Leech Seed," Ash told him. "Pikachu, Thunderbolt on Eletux!"

"Pika... CHUUUUUUU!" Pikachu said, releasing a powerful lightning bolt towards his fellow Electric type.

"Not so fast! Raptorch, get in front of Eletux and shield him with your body!" Natalie commanded. "You're a Ground type, so electricity shouldn't harm you in the slightest!"

"Rap!" Raptorch cried, as he jumped in front of his partner just in time to block the attack, negating it completely, albeit he was forced to close his eyes due the light produced by the attack.

"Good one, sis! Now Eletux, counter with Water Gun!" Vitor added.

"Ele!" Eletux cried, as he fired once again a stream of water from his mouth, hitting Pikachu squarely.

"Orchynx, now! Use Leech Seed on Raptorch!" Theo ordered.

"What? Raptorch, watch out!"

Orchynx did as ordered, firing once again a cluster of seeds at the Fire and Ground type Pokemon. Despite hearing Natalie's warning, Raptorch was too slow, and the seeds landing on his body. The moment they did, they quickly grew roots that wrapped themselves

around the Fire Dino Pokemon, impairing his movements and draining his energy.

"Yes! Direct hit!" Theo cheered.

"Raptorch, try to get rid of those!" Natalia panicked. Raptorch did as she told him, but other than uselessly trash his arms, he had no idea of what to do.

"Good job Theo! Now that you have the advantage, you should press the attack!" Ash advised him.

"Now Orchynx, use Vine Whip!" Theo commanded.

Once again, the Kitten Pokemon grew two grassy vines from the sides of his body, and used them to whip the now helpless Raptorch.

"Eletux, quickly, Water Gun on Orchynx!" Vitor ordered.

"Pikachu, Quick Attack on Eletux!"

Eletux did as ordered, firing a stream of water from his mouth at Orchynx, the water blast pushing it away from Raptorch and interrupting his attack, even if it didn't cause that much damage, but in doing so he was unable to dodge Pikachu slamming into him once again, the small yellow Pokemon packing a deceptively strong attack, sending the Water type crashing into Raptorch.

"Eletux, no!" Vitor cried.

"Time to finish this! Orchynx, use Vine Whip on the two of them!" Theo said, almost savoring victory.

"Orrrrr!" Orchynx meowed, as he once again released two vine whips hidden from the sides of his body, and used them to lash both Pokemon.

Due Raptorch's weakened state thanks to the Leech Seed, he was quickly weakened, with Eletux soon following, falling before the

constant super effective move.

Clemont raised a hand in Ash and Theo's direction. "Raptorch and Eletux can't fight anymore! The winners are Ash and Theo!"

"Great job, Pikachu!" Ash praised his starter, who happily returned with her trained, reclaiming his usual spot on his shoulder. Ash then turned at Theo with a conciliatory smile. "Good job Theo! See, if you work together-"

"OH YES!" Theo loudly cheered, ignoring Ash, pumping his fist into the air. "I beat you! I totally beat you! Who's the best trainer! ME! That's who!"

"You only won because you have an experienced trainer on your side!" Natalie fired back, as she returned her defeated Raptorch to his Pokeball. "Before he coached you, Vitor and I were kicking your sorry ass!"

"Yeah! If you have fought against either of us solo, we would have beaten you," Vitor added, also recalling his fainted Eletux.

"Now, now, come on kids, it was just a sparring match," Bamb'o said, walking towards the battlefield, followed by Serena and Bonnie. "No need to make a fuss over something so minor. Yes, it's true that Theo has Ash's help, but let's not diminish his contribution to the fight. And Theo, being happy when you win is okay, but only bad sports rub their victory on their opponents' face. Learning to enjoy victory with grace is as important as learning to take defeats in stride."

"Whatever," Theo dismissively said. "Anyway, I don't have anything else to do here. Come on Orchynx!"

"Or!" the Kitten Pokemon said, following his trainer out of the ranch.

"As for you two, follow me. I have some potions in my lab that will get your Pokemon back in shape," Bamb'o told the twins. "I guess you

can't wait to start your journey either!"

"We should better get going as well," Ash suggested. "Now that we're done with Bamb'o, we should head to the Pokemon Center so Serena can get her Contest Pass and I sign for the League."

Everybody nodded in agreement, considering their bussiness with Bamb'o settled for the time being.

...

The Pokemon Center wasn't very different from the ones Ash had seen in his previous journey, but there were two things that stood out not just to him, but to his Kalosians friends as well: the first one was that the Nurse Joy at the counter didn't have the pink hair styled in two ring-shaped pigtails, this one had dark blue straight hair.

"Heh, look at that, a regional variant Nurse Joy," Bonnie said with a snicker.

"Bonnie! Don't be so rude!" Clemont chastised her.

And the second was that, rather than a Chansey, a Blissey, an Audino or a Wigglytuff, the nurse was assisted by two Pokemon: an Aromatisse, and another Pokemon none of them had seen before: it was half the size of the Nurse Joy's height, with a long body covered in purple feathers that flared up at its collarbone and its feet. It had two thin long arms ending in four sharp green claws. It had a white face shaped like an old plague doctor mask, and the top of its head resembled a hat with two small green wings on it.

Ash and Serena took their Pokedex out to scan this new Pokemon:

" Miasmedic, the Plague Doctor Pokemon and one of Spritzee's possible evolutions. Fairy/Poison. It has the ability to both cause and cure disease. Using its claws, it injects pathogens into its foes."

"Whoa, I didn't know Spritzee had another evolution!" Serena gasped.

"It does, but only Tandorian Spritzee can evolve into Miasmedic," the nurse explained upon hearing the honey blonde. "I take you aren't from here, are you? No matter, both natives and foreigners are welcome to our Pokemon Center! What can I do for you?" the blue haired Nurse Joy asked, just as friendly as her pink-haired relatives.

"Hello there! We're new in the region. Aside from having our Pokemon checked, I'd like to sign up for the Tandor League!" Ash announced. He then pointed towards Serena. "And my friend here wants to sign up for the Contest season."

"Of course," the nurse said, while her Pokemon placed all their Pokeballs, Pikachu and Dedenne on a tray, and took them to the back of the center. "Can I have your Pokedex, please?"

Ash and Serena did so, and after a couple minutes, she returned them back.

"There, all done!" Nurse Joy said, smiling cordially. She then looked at Serena. "The first round of contests will begin in less than a week. Right now, the closest contest will be held at Kevlar Town, to the west of Moki Town. To get there, all you have to do is follow the Lakeside Path."

"Thanks a lot, Nurse Joy!" Serena happily replied.

"Does Kevlar Town have a Gym as well?" Ash excitedly asked.

The boy from Kanto deflated when the nurse shook her head.

"Kevlar Town has no Pokemon Gym, sorry. The closest Pokemon Gym is on Nowtoch City. To get there, once you're in Kevlar Town, go north via Owten Nook, and you'll get there."

"I see. Thank you, Nurse Joy," Ash said.

The group went to sit at the lobby and wait for the check up to finish. Clemont then looked at the hour on one of the Center's screens.

"I'd say it's a bit too late to go to Kevlar Town, but too early to have dinner and turn in," Clemont noted. "Do you guys want to do something?"

"I think I'm going to train with Greninja and Pikachu once the checkup is done. If you want to join us, all you have to do is ask," Ash told them.

"I think I'm going to look some more information into the region's power plants," Clemont said.

"I'm going to groom all your Pokemon once the checkup is over!" Bonnie excitedly said, brush already in hand.

"I think I'm going to do some exploring," Serena said. "We went directly to Bambo's Lab, spend a good chunk of the day there, then we came here. I'd like to see the sights of the town."

"Very well then. Make sure to get back before it's dinnertime, though," Clemont told her.

...

It took Serena less than half an hour to see almost the whole town, with no spot in particular catching her interest.

"Maybe I should have stayed with Ash and have some training done as well..." Serena said aloud. While she wasn't lazy when it comes to training, she didn't have Ash burning passion for it either -at least when it came to battles, she loved to come up with and try new performing routines-, and she liked to spend her free time doing something else as well. "Oh well, at least I got a nice walk out of it... huh?"

Then, something caught her eye when she thought that there was nothing in town that would draw her interest: a clothing store.

"Now that I think about it, it's been a while since the last time I bought some new clothes," Serena said.

Her mind drifted back to that fateful day on Courmarine City, when she took part on her very first Performance, which ended in such disastrous way. However, while the Serena of old would have just given up, like she gave up so many things before, she decided that this time would be different, she would persevere, she would achieve her dream. And as a way to show her inner change, she also changed her outside appearance by cutting her hair short and donning a different set of clothes.

But now, Serena realized she wasn't that girl either as well. She had learned a lot through her journey through Kalos, culminating in the Master Class Performance, making it to the very finals and fancing her mentor and idol, Aria. And while she lost, she managed to learn one last valuable lesson, the last missing piece that would allow her to finally reach her dream.

Upon seeing her reflection on the shop window, Serena realized for the first time that her hair had grown almost to the same length it was when she started her journey on Kalos.

"Guess it's true that they say about time passing fast when your're having fun," Serena said, passing a hand through her now much longer locks of honey blond hair. She wondered if she should cut her hair again, but this time decided against it. Then, for some reason, her mind recalled tagline from the sign at the town's entrance: "The town of fresh beginnings... fresh beginnings..."

Yes, this was a fresh beginning. And to show it, Serena decided that a wardrobe change was in order.

And this time, it wouldn't be just for her.

...

A couple hours later, back at the Pokemon Center, the rest of the group were done for the day, and given that it was starting to get dark, decided that it was a good moment to have some dinner.

"Ah, I missed those training sessions with Greninja so bad!" Ash said, as he and his two Pokemon entered the Pokemon lobby. "Boy, I'm starving! What about you two?"

"Pi-Pika!" Pikachu agreed.

"Gre," Greninja said, confirming he was hungry, but not wanting to sound as eager to eat as his Trainer and Electric-type teammate.

"I'll be getting the food for the Pokemon ready, then we can go to the Center's cafeteria to eat something ourselves," Clemont offered, as he began to dig inside his backpack for the food.

"Hey, what about Serena? She isn't here yet. It would be rude to start without her," Bonnie pointed out.

"Huh? Serena isn't back yet?" Ash asked, looking around the lobby to see that, indeed, the aspiring coordinator was nowhere to be seen. "I thought she'd be back by now. I mean, what did she find in this little town to catch her interest?"

"Hey everybody!" Serena's voice said, as the Pokemon Center's automatic doors slid open. "Sorry for the lateness!"

"Hey there Serena, we were about to-whoa!" Ash gasped in shock, and he wasn't the only one.

Serena wasn't wearing her usual pink dress, red jacket, red and black hat and brown boots. Instead, she was now wearing a black long sleeved t-shirt cropped so it exposed her midriff, with pink trimmed sleeves and a picture of pink butterfly wings on its chest with the blue ribbon that Ash had gifted her attached in the middle.

She was wearing once again a red skirt (though this one was a little shorter than the one she initially wore), tight high black stockings, red and black sneakers with a pink star to the sides, and a black beret with a red pokeball symbol on it.

"So... what do you think?" Serena asked, making a twirl so they could appreciate her new look better.

"Whoa, you look amazing Serena!" Bonnie praised.

"You think so?" the honey blonde asked.

"Totally!" Ash agreed, making Serena blush a little. "Though, even if you look amazing, why the change of wardrobe?"

"Well... given that we're about to start a new journey, I decided to get a new look to go with it. And I wasn't the only one. Ta-dah!" Serena said while lifting the bags she carried, bags the others didn't realize she had until now. "I also took the liberty to get some new clothes for you guys!"

"Really? That's great!" Bonnie cheered, as she took one of Serena's bags and inspected its contents.

"Now that you mention it, these are kind of worn down, so I could use something new," Clemont said, looking at his overalls.

"That was so kind of you," Ash said.

"Come on, go and put them on! I want to see how they look on you!" Serena excitedly urged them.

Five minutes later, the rest of the group had changed as well.

Serena had bought another overalls for Clemont, since she was aware the inventor favored practical clothing that could be used for mechanical work. This one, though, was dark grey and blueish grey, with the edges of the sleeves and trouser legs had green trims.

Bonnie was wearing a short-sleeved lavender shirt with white sleeves and a purple ribbon on it, a purple skirt with golden sun patterns over black knee-length pants, but kept the same pink mary janes.

And lastly, there was Ash, whom in Serena's definitely not biased opinion looked the most handsome of all of them with his new clothes: Ash was now wearing a short sleeved blue jacket with four pockets with black lines across its sleeves and through the zipper, grayish blue pants with light blue trouser legs, and blue sneakers with red stripes. Lastly, he was now wearing a red and blue cap with a light blue lightning bolt symbol on it.

"So, what do you think?" Serena asked. "Do you like the new clothes?"

"Yes! They're awesome!" Bonnie beamed.

"Yeah, these overalls are great!" Clemont added.

"Indeed, they are great. But that's not a surprise, you have a great taste for clothes, Serena," Ash praised her.

"Th-Thank you, Ash," Serena said while averting his gaze, as she felt her cheeks turning pink.

The moment was ruined when Ash's stomach rumbled. Loudly.

"Hehe, sorry!" Ash said, placing his hand behind his back. "I guess that the training made me hungrier than I thought."

"Pika..." Pikachu sighed, shaking his head.

"Alright, let's have a good dinner, and then off to bed! Tomorrow we finally begin our journey through Tandor!" Serena cheered.

Author's Note: And thus, our heroes finally arrive to Tandor! And as it's usual when Ash arrives to a new region, one of the first persons they met is the local Pokemon Professor, followed by a potential companion and/or rivals. But since all the companion slots are taken, only rivals are left. Aside from canon rival Theo, Ash and Serena will have to deal with Natalie and Vitor, respectively, who, for those of you who don't know, are the female and male player characters.

Those who played the games surely recognize the initial scene as the game's opening. For those who haven't played, pay it no mind. It's not like it's going to be important to the plot or anything in the future ;P

Though, as for Kellyn and Lucille having three children, no, that's not a typo: their third and oldest child is Kellyn jr. aka the Ranger who appeared in that Sinnoh episode. Since the Kellyn of the anime is Ash's age and the one from Uranium is an adult, yet they're both the same Kellyn from the Pokemon Ranger games, I had to split them in two diferent characters

And since we're in another region, Ash and co. get a new look! And yeah, Serena's back to having long hair, simply because I liked it better that way. Yes, I'm aware that she was tied to her character development and blah blah blah, but honestly, the "girl cuts her hair as a sign of character growth" is a trope I'm tired of seeing. If you want to see a picture of how the gang looks, as well as Tandorian Nurse Joy, you can see it in the Ao3 version.

Next time, our heroes take the first step on their journey through Tandor, and one of them will be catching their first Pokemon? In the meantime, don't forget to leave a review!

Teach me How to Battle!

Author's Note: After a setup and introduction, the real journey finally begins in this chapter! Enjoy:

Chapter 3: Teach me how to battle!

Route 1/ Lakeside Path

The next morning, after waking up, the group of four and their Pokemon had breakfast at the Pokemon Center before leaving for Kevlar Town. They couldn't wait to see what the rest of Tandor was like.

And what they were seeing so far didn't disappoint them. Lakeside Path was a beautiful expanse of green grass surrounded by dense forests, and a river of crystalline blue water running alongside it. The beautiful nature trail wasn't the only thing that enthralled the gang, as they were quick to check the new Pokemon that roamed the area, just like the squirrel-like brown Pokemon with a blue belly, blue ears, blue tail tip and blue cheek mars that scampered across the tree branches

" *Chynmunk, the Chipmunk Pokemon. Normal. The length of a Chynmunk's stripes determines its authority in a group. If it spots a predator, it shrieks loudly to warn the others.*" The Pokedex explained.

There were also some Pokemon with a pink, worm-like body but the head of a bear, and a leaf-like coat over their back.

" *Cubbug, the Love Bug Pokemon. Bug. It shares characteristics with bug and mammal Pokémon. Being in its presence has a calming effect.* "

Not just land, but they could see many more Pokemon swimming on the clear waters of the river. There were many Magikarp -it seems that with the exception of Unova, there were Magikarps pretty much everywhere-, as well as a Pokemon that looked like blue frogs with round, purple bodies and purple cheek marks.

" Fortog, the Round Toad Pokemon. Water/Poison. This Pokémon is rarely seen walking because of its weight. Rather, it rolls to get anywhere. They are often found at the bottoms of lakes."

There were also many bird Pokemon soaring the skies, but they were too far away for the Pokedex to scan. Oh well, sooner or later they'd run into one or several at ground level.

"Heh, I can't still get over the fact that Nurse Joys here have blue hair," Ash began. "Wonder if Officer Jennys are blonde instead? Or redheads?"

"There aren't Officer Jennys in Tandor, Ash," Clemont told him. "According to what I learned about this region, the Ranger Corps are the ones who keep law and order in Tandor."

"Rangers, uh? I see," Ash said, recalling the few times he had crossed paths with a Ranger.

"Ranger? What's that?" Serena asked.

"They're a kind of Pokemon trainers that don't use pokeballs," Ash began to explain. "They instead use this gadget thingies called Stylers, which allow them to bond with wild Pokemon quickly, and thus get them to help, but only temporarily."

"Sounds really weird," Bonnie commented.

"Maybe, but it works for them," Ash said, shrugging nonchalantly. "Though, it's not that they only use wild Pokemon, most Rangers also have a permanent Pokemon of their own as a partner, even if they don't keep them inside Pokeballs."

Suddenly, Clemont stopped. Naturally, they all turned towards him.

"Big brother? Something's wrong?" Bonnie asked.

"Don't you guys hear that?" Clemont asked.

"Hear what?" Serena asked.

"A Pokemon?" Ash asked. Pikachu's ears perked up, alerted to possible dangers.

"No, it sounds like... an engine?" Clemont said.

"Yes, I think I'm hearing it now..." Serena said. "Weird, since there doesn't appear to be any roads nearby..."

"Guys, move!" Ash said, as he grabbed his three companions by the arms and dragged them away from the main grassland and into a nearby cluster of trees.

A few seconds passed, and now everybody could hear the sound of engines much louder, and coming even closer. Then, a mob of bikers rushed in front of them, men and women of varying ages, the oldest appeared to be in their late forties, and the youngest being older teenagers. While their clothes varied from individual to individual, all of them were wearing a sleeveless blue jacket with a Dunsparce on the back.

Once they could no longer hear the sound of the engines, the group decided it was safe to come out from the hiding spot behind the trees.

"Geez, what's with those guys? Does this look like a road to them?" Serena asked, placing her hands on her shoulders. "Could have run over us if we didn't move in time..."

"Guess Tandor has its own share of jerks too," Bonnie said, mimicking Serena's stance.

"Nenene!" Denenne added, mimicking Bonnie.

"Let's continue," Ash suggested. "It's not that we're going to encounter anymore of those bikers running through a grass field, right?"

"Way to tempt fate, Ash," Bonnie deadpanned.

Though fate proved Ash right, and they managed to continue without any further incidents. Once they saw it was close to noon, they found a good spot near the river and decided to stop in order to rest a little and then have some lunch.

"This is a good place to stay. We can rest, or train for a bit if you prefer, and once we finish lunch, we can continue our journey towards Kevlar Town," Clemont stated, with the three others nodding in return.

"Everyone, come out!" Serena said, tossing all her pokeball into the air, releasing the Pokemon inside, an action that was mimicked by Ash and Clemont as well.

A few moments later, everything was settled. Pikachu, Dedenne, Pancham, Sylveon, Bunnelby and Chespin were playing with a ball, while Luxray, Braixen and Greninja relaxed.

Feeling that their Pokemon were set for the time being, Serena opened her backpack and, after digging a little, pulled out a small booklet and started reading it. She read in silence for a couple minutes, until she reached for a certain part.

"Oh, that's no good..." she unwittingly said out loud.

"What are you reading, Serena?" Ash asked, upon noticing what his traveling companion was doing. "What is no good?"

"I got this at Moki Town's Pokemon Center," Serena said, showing Ash the booklet. He could see it was information about contests. "So

far, most of the information here matches with what you've told me, but there are some rules which are more complex. For example, contests that use the double format doesn't allow to use in the Contest Battle the same Pokemon you used in the Appeal Round, meaning that you must have at least four Pokemon," Serena explained, worryingly looking at where her three Pokemon were.

"It's not that big of a problem, Serena. All you have to do is catch one or two more Pokemon," Ash reassured.

"Well... I'm not that proactive in catching Pokemon. Despite how long we spent traveling through Kalos, I only got two Pokemon besides my starter," Serena said.

"That's easy to solve, though," Ash said, looking around. "Say, would you like to look around and catch a Pokemon?"

"Eh..."

"Something wrong, Serena?"

"Well, this is going to sound a bit silly but... well, when I caught Panchan and Sylveon back when she was an Eevee... I caught them because I felt a special connection between the them and me," Serena explained, as she rubbed her arm. "Going out there and chuck a pokeball to the first Pokemon that crosses my path feels... wrong."

Ash didn't say anything, he merely looked at her, his expression unreadable as he digested her words. Serena averted his gaze and grasped her blue ribbon.

"You probably think I'm being silly..." Serena said.

But much to her surprise, Ash emrely smiled. "Not in the slightest. I know what you mean."

"You do?" Serena asked.

Ash then looked upwards, his eyes looking at the branch where Greninja was resting on. "Do you remember how I caught Greninja back when he was a Froakie? It's not that I went to catch him, he was the one who came to me. And he wasn't the only one. I have plenty of Pokemon that I didn't catch before I bonded with them to some extent."

"Is that why you aren't going out to catch any new Pokemon either?" Serena pointed out.

"Guess you're right," Ash chuckled, rubbing the back of his head, before his expression grew serious. "Though, if you're so worried about not having enough Pokemon soon enough, then maybe you should go and try to capture one yourself without waiting for them to come to you."

"I guess you have a point," Serena conceded.

"... but don't get too stressed about it. We just barely began our trip through the region. Sooner or later, we shall cross paths with a Pokemon or two that are the right fit for you," he reassured her.

"Right," she said with a nod. "Besides, the first round of contests use Single Format, so I can still do with the Pokemon I have."

"Yeah. Like a coordinator friend of mine used to say, no need to worry," Ash said, chuckling a little.

"Birb!" a new voice said. Though "chirped" should be a better word.

Ash and Serena looked in the direction of the voice, and saw that it belonged to a small bird Pokemon with a round blue body. It was the same Pokemon they had seen soaring through the blue skies, but now that it was on the ground, they could appreciate it better: it had yellow tail feathers and two antenna-like feathers of the same color extending from the top of its head. Just below its beak there was a segmented cyan crest that looked like a large smiling mouth.

"Well, speaking of Pokemon that came to us," Serena joked, as she and Ash scanned the newcomer with their Pokedex.

"Birbie, the Eden Bird Pokemon. Normal/Flying. It defends itself by dazzling opponents by flashing its brightly colored plumage. They are known for their elaborate mating dances."

"So, you're a Birbie, huh? Nice to meet you!" Ash greeted.

Birbie didn't say anything. He looked intently at Ash, then at Serena, then started to look around, poking some things with his beak, inspecting their little camp with curious blue eyes.

"Ash? Do you think that maybe we invaded his territory or something?" Serena asked, a little worried that they may have upset the bird Pokemon.

"Nah. I guess he's just curious. Looks pretty young. Maybe he hasn't seen many humans yet," Ash said.

Birbie then saw something that saw his mood change from merely curious to excited: the Pokemon that weren't resting chasing after the toy ball. It really looked that they were having lots of fun, and Birbie really wanted to be part of that.

"Birb! Birb! Birbie!" the little bird Pokemon said, bouncing in place.

"You want to play with them, Birbie?" Ash asked. The round bird energiccally nodded. Ash then walked towards the group playing with the ball, and drew their attention by clapping his hands twice. "Hey guys! This Birbie saw how much fun you were having playing with that ball, and he'd like to know if he can play with you. What do you say?"

"Pi-Pika!" Pikachu happily agreed.

"Chan, Pancham!" Pancham agreed as well.

"Bun," Bunnelby nodded.

Thankfully, all the Pokemon were okay to include the wild newcomer in their game, which proceeded as usual.

"Look at him go," Serena said, watching Birbie chase the ball.

"Like I said, he must be pretty young. He's discovering a whole new world," Ash added. He then looked up towards the sun. "It seems to be a bit too early to eat. Say, how about if we train? That way, we can work up our appetite."

"Your appetite doesn't need any work up, but I'm for it," Serena said. "Braixen versus Pikachu?"

"You mentioned double battles before, and now that I think about it, how are you on those? I remember that we battled together a couple times, but I don't think I ever saw you use more than one Pokemon at once outside Showcases," Ash pointed out.

"Well... not much," she sheepishly admitted. "But even if you hold back, I don't feel very confident fighting against Greninja and Pikachu at once, given what you were able to do with that Gible..."

"Two versus one then?" Ash asked. "After all, this is to get you accustomed to double battles. I think I'll use Greninja. He needs some action too!"

As soon as Ash said this, Greninja landed behind him.

"Alright... in that case, I'll go with Pancham and Sylveon," Serena said. "Pancham, Sylveon, come here! Time to do some training!"

Pancham and Sylveon stopped what they were doing upon hearing their trainer's call. They turned to the rest of their friends, shrugged, told them something -probably to keep playing without them- and walked towards Serena.

"Listen, since some contests use double battles, we need to start working on fighting together. It shouldn't be much of a problem, since

you've been working together when doing performances," Serena told her two Pokemon.

"Syl!/Cham!" the two of them agreed in unison.

"Say Greninja, do you feel like taking on two opponents at once?" Ash asked.

"Gren!" Greninja said, adopting a fighting stance.

"Good! Let us begin then!" Ash called. "Serena, you make the first move!"

~Serena (Pancham & Sylveon) VS Ash (Greninja)~

"Alright then! Sylveon, Fairy Wind! Pancham, Stone Edge!" Serena commanded.

Sylveon started to wave her feelers, raising a pink colored gust of wind, while Pancham slammed both paws into the ground, summoning a row of large pillars in Greninja's direction.

"Greninja, jump and use those pillars as platforms!" Ash called.

"Gre-NINJA!" Greninja cried, and with his impressive agility, he leaped just when one of the stone columns was about to rise just below him, landing in the column behind that one, and hopped from one to the one before.

"Think before calling for a move, Serena. Letting your opponent use your Pokemon's moves against you will also make you lose points," Ash told her. "Well done, Greninja! Now use Water Shuriken!"

"Dodge it, quickly!" Serena told her two Pokemon.

Greninja spread his arms, summoning a star made of water on each hand, before tossing one at Pancham at another at Sylveon, who were already running away to avoid the powerful watery attack,

which, ultimately, and fortunately, they did, by running in opposite directions.

"Good job, guys!" Serena praised. "Now-"

"Yes, you dodged Greninja's attack. But now Pancham and Sylveon are apart from each other and thus unable to work together or lend each other help," Ash said, much to Serena's horror. "Greninja, Aerial Ace on Pancham!"

"Ninja!" Greninja said, as his forearm started to glow with a white light, before dashing towards Pancham.

Serena knew that, even with the type advantage, the Playful Pokemon was no match for Ash's strongest Kalos Pokemon, and Aerial Ace was impossible to evade. However, despite her growing panic, an idea dawned upon her.

"Pancham, use Stone Edge on yourself!" Serena commanded.

"Pan-CHAM!" while confused at first, the little panda quickly realized what his trainer was planning, and slammed his paws into the ground once again. A rock column burst from the ground beneath his feet, pushing him upwards, just in time to avoid Greninja's attack, which ended up hitting said column, hurting his hand a little.

"That was very clever, Serena! You're starting to get better!" Ash praised her.

"I have a great teacher!" Serena replied with a wide smile, winking at him. "Time to regroup and counterattack! Sylveon, Fairy Wind again!"

"Greninja, dodge!"

"Syl!" Once again, Sylveon started to wave her feelers, summoning a gust of pink wind towards the Ninja Pokemon, who ran away in the opposite direction.

"And Pancham, Dark Pulse!" Serena added.

"Paaaaaaan... !" from his vantage point, Pancham cupped his paws together, summoning an orb of black and purple swirling energy, before releasing it in the form of a beam of the same color. "... CHAAAAAAAAM!"

"Greninja, Double Team!" Ash called.

Greninja nodded, and in an instant, the field was filled with dozens of illusory copycats of the Ninja Pokemon. Some of them were instantly dispelled when they were hit by Pancham and Sylveon's attacks, but many of them still remained, hiding the real one among their numbers.

"Now, Water Shuriken!" Ash commanded.

Every Greninja began to form a single watery star between his hands. There's no way for Serena to know which one was the real one! Though, perhaps she didn't need to, as another idea popped inside her mind.

"Pancham, get behind Sylveon, and Sylveon, use Protect!" Serena commanded.

Pancham nodded, leaped from his stony platform, landing just behind the Interwining Pokemon, who formed a green energy field in front of her, just as the Greninjas launched their Shuriken towards Serena's Pokemon, though, predictably, most of them just vanished the moment they touched the barrier, with only one crashing against it, resulting in an explosion of water that, as expected, left Pancham and Sylveon unscathed.

"Very good Serena! Heh, if you keep fighting like that, I'll be forced to use the Battle Bond!" Ash said.

Of course, Serena knew that Ash was just being nice, given that her Pokemon were on the defensive most of the time. She grimaced a

little. "Please don't. Greninja is already challenging as he is now."

"I guess I'm craving an opponent that I can go all out against," Ash admitted. "Boy, that first Gym battle can't come soon enough."

"Guess you'll have to do with sparring against us in the meantime. Sylveon, find the real one with Swift!" Serena ordered.

Sylveon waved her feelers once again, releasing a flurry of sparkling golden stars that quickly destroyed all the illusionary duplicates until only the real Greninja remained.

"Greninja, deflect all those stars with Cut!" Ash ordered.

Greninja nodded, and summoned a kunai-shaped blade of pure white energy in order to parry the incoming projectiles. However, the white kunai then grew longer, its color going from white to black with purple edges.

"Wait, that's not Cut, that's..." Ash said, as a huge grin spread across his face. "Greninja, you learned Night Slash!"

As Serena saw Greninja counter Sylveon's attack with his recently learned move, she let out a sigh. "Geez... first Gible evolved into Gabite, and now Greninja learns a new move... you're surely getting more mileage out of this sparring sessions than us," Serena commented, before sighing a little.

"Well... I don't know what to say to that... !" Ash chuckled, rubbing the back of his head.

...

While Ash and Serena had their sparring battle, Clemont and Bonnie were watching over the rest of the Pokemon, some of them still playing with the rubber ball alongside the wild Birbie. Said Pokemon, however, was drawn by the noise the three Pokemon of the two humans were doing. With the curiosity and short attention span that

came with youth, Birbie quickly forgot about the game, and went to check the source of the noise.

"Birb!?"

"Birbie?" Bonnie asked, trailing after him.

And what he saw left him completely speechless.

"Pancham, surround Greninja with Stone Edge! Sylveon, climb the rocks and attack Greninja from above with Fairy Wind!" Serena commanded.

"Not bad, but that won't be enough to put Greninja down! Greninja, Water Shuriken!"

Birbie's eyes grew so wide, they threatened to pop out of his head. Never in his admittedly short life had the small bird Pokemon seen such an spectacle like the one that was happening before. The sheer strength of those Pokemon's attacks, the way those Pokemon moved... it was like a completely new world had been laid before him.

"Say, do you like that?" Bonnie asked the wild Pokemon. "That's Ash's Greninja, and those are Serena's Pancham and Sylveon. They're really strong, aren't they?"

"B-Birb!" Birbie replied, nodding.

"Of course. Ash and Serena did a good job training them," Bonnie said, crossing her arms. "And when I'm old enough, I'll be even better than them!"

So, with the help of a human, a Pokemon can become that strong? Every new revelation felt like a giant hammer into the young bird's worldview. Then, an idea popped inside his mind. If he impressed these humans, then maybe they'd train him just like they did with the

other Pokemon. His decision settled, Birbie then started to fly towards Ash, while crying loudly.

"Birb! Birb, birbie!" Birbie cried, trying to draw Ash's attention, while flying around him.

"Birbie?" Ash asked. "Do you want something?"

Birbie then turned around, and began to fly back in the direction where the other Pokemon were playing.

"I think he wants us to follow him," Serena deduced. "Maybe he wants to show us something?"

"I see. Alright, let's take a break for the time being, Greninja," Ash told his Kalosian Pokemon.

"You too, Pancham, Sylveon," Serena said, as she and Ash followed Birbie.

Once they returned to the playground, Birbie asked something to the other Pokemon, who merely nodded and moved away, but left the rubber ball alone. Humans and Pokemon alike watched what Birbie was planning to do.

Birbie then looked at the ball intently, started to flap his tiny wings to gain altitude, and dashed towards the ball leaving a trail of fading white light behind. Birbie slammed against the rubber ball, sending it flying, before it hit a tree and bouncing back.

"That was Quick Attack!" Clemont pointed out.

"Of course! Birbie saw your Pokemon fighting, so guess he wants to show you what he can do," Bonnie said in realization.

"Really? That's great!" Ash excitedly said. "Such a good Quick Attack!"

"What else can you do, Birbie?" Serena asked.

Birbie then spread his tiny wings and puffed his chest, as if to emphasize his segmented crescent mark. Said mark started to glow with a bright white light, causing humans and Pokemon alike to shield their eyes, before the entire zone was bathed in light. It took the others a few moments to adjust back to the natural sunlight.

"That was Flash!" Serena said.

"Come on Birbie, do something more!" Bonnie squealed.

"Nenene!" Dedenne encouraged.

Birbie's little body was overflowing with excitement. They liked him! They thought he was great! He couldn't fail now. If he truly wanted to impress them, nothing but the attack he had been trying to master for the past few weeks would do. He hadn't grasped it just yet, but with this confidence boost, he was sure he'll be able to do it.

Once again using the toy ball as a target, Birbie started to flap his little wings as fast as he could, raising a wind current that appeared to elevate the ball at first. However, the wind started to die down, and Birbie frantically flapped his wings even faster, but to no avail, and the ball touched the ground once again.

"Huh?" Serena asked.

Oh no, he was losing them! He needed to try a deep breath, Birbie once again attempted to create a small tornado by flapping his wings, and once again, the wind died down before the tornado could fully form.

"I think that was supposed to be a Gust...?" Clemont asked, scratching the side of his head.

"Birb..." Birbie cawed, lowering his head in shame.

"Hey, don't get discouraged, Birbie! Sometimes, it takes some time to master certain moves," Ash told the blue bird.

"Yes, we all think you were great!" Serena added, before looking at the group of Pokemon around them. "Right guys?"

All the other Pokemon cried affirmatively, trying to cheer Birbie. At least, all of them minus one.

"Pi-pika," Pikachu said, crossing his arms.

"Pikachu?" Ash asked, confused.

"Pikapi!" Pikachu walked towards Birbie, and started to move his arms emphatically as if he was explaining the bird something. "Pika! Pikapi! Pi-pika!"

Birbie seemed to drink every word Pikachu was saying, nodding several times. Once Pikachu was done, he left Birbie the space he needed and returned to Ash .

Birbie once again stared at the ball. He flapped his wings, but rather than summon a gust of wind, he instead elevated a meter or so into the air, before once again attempting to summon a little tornado. And io and behold, unlike the other two tries, this time a tornado was sucessfully formed, launching the ball into the air, before it returned to the ground.

"You did it, Birbie!" Bonnie cheered.

"Of course! He was unable to form a Gust at ground level. He needed to stay mid air in order to do so," Clemont observed.

"So that's what Pikachu was telling Birbie!" Serena said in realization, beaming at the yellow rodent.

"Pi-pika!" Pikachu proudly nodded.

"Should have realized of that. I mean, Pikachu has seen plenty of my Pokemon fight, so he must have a good idea of how most moves work. Isn't that right, buddy?" Ask asked.

"Pikapi!" Pikachu agreed again.

"Congratulations Birbie! You just learned a new move!" Bonnie cheered, patting the bird on the head.

"Bir-Birbie!" Birbie cheered.

Birbie's celebration was interrupted when he was startled by a roar. No, it was more like a growl of hunger. What was that? Birbie had never hear anything in his life before, and it sounded like a dangerous predator! Panicked, he started to frantically look around, lest this henious beast put his new friends in danger-

"Don't worry Birbie, that was only Ash's stomach," Serena said, giggling a little.

"Guess that sparring match from before did work up my apetite, hehe," Ash sheepishly chuckled.

"Well, I think this is a good time to have lunch," Clemont decided.

"Say, do you want to eat with us, Birbie?" Ash asked. "Clemont's Pokemon food is amazing! And you're going to love Serena's pokepuffs!"

Birbie's eyes opened wide in shock. Not only did these humans taught him a new move, but they were willing to give him food as well? Without asking anything in return? Boy, humans were amazing!

The lunch happened without incidents, and indeed, true to Ash's word, the food Birbie was fed was the most delicious food he had ever tasted. Way better than the berries that grew on the forest he called his home. After that, Ash and Serena resumed their sparring session, with the other Pokemon offered to spar with Birbie as well, so he could hone his attacks more.

And then, what was essentially the best day of Birbie's life was cut short when he saw the humans packing up their stuff, as if they were

going to leave. Why did they want to leave?

"According to this, if we keep a good pace, we'll reach Kevlar Town by tomorrow before noon," Serena said while checking a map on her tablet.

"Great! In that case, let's not waste anymore time!" Ash said, as he and the others began to walk. He then turned at Birbie, and waved at him. "Goodbye, Birbie! It was great to meet you!"

"I'm sure you'll become a really strong Pokemon!" Serena added.

"Birb...?" he chirped in confusion, before dashing after them. "Birb! Birbie, birb!"

"What's wrong, Birbie?" Bonnie asked, before she quickly realized what was going on. "Do you... want to come with us?"

"Birb!" Birbie said, nodding energetically. He didn't care if he had to leave his home, there's no way he was going to get separated from these amazing humans and their Pokemon.

"Of course you can come with us, Birbie!" Ash said, much to the bird's joy, before turning towards Serena. "Well, guess what you said about some Pokemon coming to us ended up being true sooner than I thought! Come on Serena, catch him!"

Serena, however, shook her head. "I can see that this Birbie is more of a fighter than a performer. He'll be much better under your care, Ash."

"Are you sure?" Ash asked.

Serena nodded. "I can tell Birbie will make a great member of your team. Pikachu already seems to take the role of mentor to him."

"Pikapi..." Pikachu said.

"I see. In that case..." Ash said, pulling out an empty pokeball.
"Pokeball go!"

Birbie dived into the ball, which opened up and sucked Birbie inside. The ball dropped to the grass below, and dinged without shaking even once, signaling that Birbie has been captured. Ash walked towards the pokeball, and picked it up.

"I caught a Birbie!" Ash cheered. "My first Pokemon from Tandor!"

"And I'm sure Birbie will be the first of many. For all of us," Serena said with a smile.

And with a new friend and companion in tow, the group of four continued their journey, heading towards Kevlar Town, and Serena's first contest.

Author's Note: I know, not a very long chapter, but Route 1 isn't exactly long nor has anything eventful on it. Though, not that this chapter was uneventful, as Ash has caught his first Tandorian Pokemon, Birbie! It shouldn't come as much of a surprise, since until SM, Ash always caught a regional bird as either his first or second capture of the season. Not that I made that choice out of obligation, since I like Birbie a lot and love the idea of Ash having one.

Also, yeah, I replaced Greninja's Cut with Night Slash. I will never, ever, be able to take Cut seriously as an attack.

Next chapter, Serena's first contest! She's been preparing for it with Ash, but will all the training she has done be enough to claim her first ribbon? You'll have to wait to find out. And in the meantime, don't forget to drop a review, no matter if it's a long one detailing everything you liked (or hated) about the chapter, or just a quick line saying you liked the chapter (or that you didn't like it). But please leave a review. Reviews mean a lot to me.

A Spectacular Contest Debut!

Author's Note: And here we have Serena's first contest! Will her contest debut be better than her showcase debut? Lets find out!

Also, the to the guest reviewer who ends their reviews with "as a fellow amourshipper i have this to say to you and to all my fellow amourshippers around the globe who support amourshipping, amourshipper and proud, remember that dudes and dudettes and keep up the good serenaandashshipping work dude" could you please... stop doing that? Like, the first part of your reviews are fine, so after that, whenever you're about to copy paste that meaningless word salad dump, instead... don't do that, and click the send button instead. You will? Thank you!

Chapter 4: A Spectacular Contest Debut!

Kevlar Town

Just like Serena had said, it only took the group another day of traveling to get to Kevlar Town. Just like with Moki Town, they were greeted by a sign that announced that they were entering the town.

Welcome to Kevlar Town

The Tiniest Town in Tandor!

"Tiniest town? Well... I don't think that's something to be proud of..." Bonnie mentioned, as she took a look at the town. Even from a distance, it really looked even smaller than Moki Town.

"I guess they also wanted to use an aliteration for their entrance sign," Clemont pointed out.

"Doesn't matter. Come on, let's head to the Pokemon Center first," Ash suggested, as he walked towards the town. Given its small size, he hoped they wouldn't take too long to find and reach the Pokemon Center.

"I can see the Contest Hall from here!" Bonnie cheered, before she turned towards Serena. "So, when does the contest begin?"

"In two days. We've been traveling at a pretty good pace, so we arrived with some days to spare," Serena said.

"You can use those days to do a little more training," Ash suggested. "That way you'll be extra prepared for your first contest."

"Though, I feel I should also do some training on my performing routines. All the training I've been doing lately have been combat focused, and while that's nice and good, it would be useless if I can't get past the Appeal Round," Serena said.

"Come on Serena, you reached the finals of the Master Class Shwocase! I'm sure you'll do great!" Ash said.

"I agree with Serena on that. Contests have two parts, and you can't neglect one part for the sake of another," Clemont added.

And just like Ash thought, they didn't take any time to find the Pokemon Center. They were surprised to find it a little more crowded than the one from Moki Town, who was rather empty, but it made sense, there was going to be a Contest soon. There was also one known face among the people inside the Center, that of a bown with brown hair, sitting on one of the Center's tables.

"Hey look! It's Vitor!" Ash said, and waved at the boy, who noticed them and waved them back. The group then walked towards the table. "Hey there Vitor!"

"Hello there, guys. Fancy see you again so soon," Vitor said. "Not that I'm complaining."

"So, I know it's only been a couple days, but how is your Pokemon journey going?" Ash asked. "Everything fine? Did something interesting happen to you?"

"Well, other than catching my first Pokemon, I didn't do anything special. You yourself said it, I just started my journey," Vitor said, before he chuckled. "I mean, it's not that a Legendary Pokemon is going to cross my path on the very same day I leave my hometown!"

"Yeah, the probabilities of such thing happening are so low as to be nonexistent," Clemont said, with Serena and Bonnie nodding.

"Actually-" Ash was going to say, but somebody else cut him.

"So, is Natalie with you?" Serena asked.

Vitor shook his head. "Not really. We aren't traveling together, you know. Not just because we want to see how far we can go on our own, but also because we have different goals. Since Kevlar Town doesn't have a Pokemon Gym, Natalie wouldn't have any reason to stay here other than rest and restock on supplies."

"You aren't doing the Gym Challenge?" Ash asked. The Pallet Town native had enjoyed the double battle against Vitor and his sister, the two of them showing talent for them, and Ash hoped that he could fight against the twins again in the future. But alas, it seemed that only Natalie and Theo would be his rivals. "What are you doing then, contests?"

"Exactly. Don't get me wrong, Pokemon battles are good and all that, but to me, Contests have a kind of depth that normal battles can't hope to match. They don't only measure the strength or skill of a Pokemon, but pushes their limits in new and different ways," Vitor excitedly explained. "This is going to be my first contest, and I can't wait for it to start!"

"Well, guess that makes us rivals then," Serena said while smiling so she didn't sound confrontational. "Since I'm also taking part on this

contest."

"I'll be looking forward facing you then. It would be great if the two of us made it to the finals," Vitor commented.

"Indeed," Serena nodded.

"So, I guess you two are my rivals if you're going to take part in this contest," a new voice said.

Everybody turned around to see the source of said voice. It was a girl, the same age as Ash and Serena, with long raven black hair and black slanted eyes. But the most striking thing about her was her clothes: she was dressed as a ninja, wearing a sleeveless black haori with leather shoulderpads, black matching pants, and a red obi tied around her waist. She was also carrying what appeared to be a short katana strapped to her back.

Her expression and body language helped her radiate an intimidating aura that tell Ash's group and Vitor that she wasn't planning to be friends with them.

"Are you... are you going to take part in the contest too?" Serena asked the newcomer.

"I'm not going to 'take part'," the ninja girl replied, as she narrowed her eyes at Serena. "I'm going to *win it* ."

"Well, she isn't lacking in confidence," Clemont commented.

"And why shouldn't I? Given the level of my opponents, it's not that I should be worried," the girl replied.

"You really have a high opinion of yourself, don't you?" Ash asked, the girl's attitude beginning to tick him off. "Who do you think you are?"

"Oh my, where are my manners, I didn't even introduce myself," the ninja girl said. "My name is Sayaka, member of the Nami Clan of

Tsukinami Village."

"Tsukinami Village?" Vitor repeated. "You're very far away from home then. That's on East Tendor!"

"What, did you expect that I'd begin the Contest Season just after getting my first Pokemon?" Sayaka asked, and upon seeing Vitor's face reddening a little and averting her gaze, she smirked. "No, I've been traveling the region and training my Pokemon for the past few weeks to make sure we're ready. I shall win every contest I take part on, right until I claim the title of Top Coordinator."

"Yeah well, I'm afraid that's not going to happen because you're not going to win this contest!" Bonnie shouted, before she pointed at Serena. "Do you think she's some rookie? No! This girl here is no other than Serena Gabena! She was the runner up of the Master Class Showcase in Kalos!"

Though rather than being impressed, Sayaka merely laughed.

"And I'm supposed to be intimidated by that? Showcases are nothing but a pale imitation of contests, and 'runner-up' is a just fancy way of saying 'loser'," Sayaka said, before she turned around and left. "See you in the contest. Try at least to be a worthy challenge."

The group spend a few moments in silence, before an angry Bonnie finally opened her mouth.

"Just who the hell that girl thinks she is?" Bonnie said, crossing her arms, Dedenne mimicking her from within her pouch. "I thought she would be a good keeper for Clemont, but he's way too good for her!"

Clemont silently thanked for the fact that Bonnie didn't pull her usual stunt whenever they met a pretty girl.

"She's far from the first person I met that needs an attitude adjustment," Ash said, remembering not only his fair share of rude rivals like Gary at the beginning or Paul, but those of his traveling

companions, such as Harley. "And that girl is screaming for a big ration of a humble pie. And you know what's the best way to serve it?"

"Winning this contest?" Serena asked.

"Exactly! So let's make sure to train really good so you're ready to beat not just her by any other coordinator!" Ash exclaimed.

...

And indeed, Serena spent the next two days training, both on her own and with the help of her friends, Bonnie included. Even if it had been a while since the last time she had practiced her showcasing routines, neither she nor her Pokemon had lost their touch and managed to execute them flawlessly. The battle training filled her with confidence. This time, it was Clemont who was her sparring partner. She was never close to victory, but her Pokemon did really good. And if her Pokemon were able to hold their own against a Gym Leader like Clemont, then she had nothing to fear.

The two days passed very quickly, and the day of the first contest arrived. But Serena wasn't nervous. She wasn't a rookie anymore. She was ready to wow Tandor with her Kalosian charm and skill.

When they arrived at the Contest Hall, they were greeted by a long line of people who wanted to see the beginning of the Contest Season.

"And here I thought that we were early," Ash sighed.

"Guess not early enough..." Clemont said. He adjusted his glasses as he took a look at the long queue before them. "Let's hope there are tickets left for us."

"Well, I better get going. I need to get both me and my Pokemon ready for my contest debut!" Serena excitedly said, as she headed to the backstage entrance. "Wish me luck!"

"You're going to do great, Serena!" Ash said.

"Yeah! And show that stuck up jerk what you're made of!" Bonnie added.

...

A few moments later, Serena arrived at the backstage entrance. Showing her Contest Pass, she was allowed to enter once the security guard checked that she was in the list of coordinators that would take part in the contest, and an aide guided her to a large room that appeared to be a dressing room. She was told that, once she was ready, she could go to the Coordinator's Box and wait there for the contest to begin.

Serena had chosen a white long gown with pink flaps and red trims and ribbons that bared her arms and shoulders, and a small silver-like tiara on her head. She was a bit sad that, unlike performances, Pokemon weren't allowed to wear dresses, but she found the Ball Capsules and Seals quite interesting.

She then pulled out two of her three pokeballs, and released the Pokemon inside, Braixen and Sylveon.

"Alright guys, we're about to take part in our first contest. Aren't you excited?" Serena asked.

"Brai!"

"Syl!"

"I'm glad to see that you're as eager to take part as I am. I'm sure you guys would do great no matter what. We have done this quite a lot of times already in Kalos, so no reason to be worried. And above all things, let's have lots of fun," Serena said, before returning them to the balls. She then picked her third ball, and said: "Sorry Pancham. I'll save you for the next time."

With that, the Kalos native left the changing room and went to the waiting area, where most other coordinators were. Most of them were unfamiliar faces, but she spotted Sayaka. The ninja girl was now wearing a dark blue kimono with lavender trims, decorated with light purple moon patterns, and her usually long hair was tied in a neat bun, held together by a golden headpiece shaped like a moon as well.

Serena was thankful that the black haired ninja hadn't spotted her.

"Hey, Serena!" a male voice said.

Serena turned around, and saw Vitor walking towards her. The Moki Town boy was now wearing an old time ship captain (or maybe it was admiral?) blue and white uniform, complete with a cravat and a tricorn.

"Hey there, Vitor," Serena said. "So, how are you feeling?"

"Truth be told, a little nervous," the brown haired boy replied. "I knew we'd perform in front of a lot of people, but the crowd out there..."

"I know the feeling. When I started doing Showcases in Kalos, I was also pretty nervous as well, though I eventually got used to it," Serena said.

"So... any advice to a newbie on how to deal with crowds?" Vitor asked, hoping his more experienced rival would feel kind enough to help him.

"While this may not work for everyone... try to focus on your Pokemon first and foremost. If you focus your attention elsewhere, you won't realize there's a crowd watching until you're done," Serena told him.

"Alright, I'll try that. Thanks a lot for the advice!" Vitor replied. "Given that we're rivals, I wasn't expecting you to help me."

"I'd lie if I said nobody helped me when I was starting, so I think it's appropriate for me to help others in the same situation I was," Serena said, smiling sincerely.

...

After waiting almost half an hour on the line, Ash, Clemont, Bonnie bought their tickets and entered the Contest Hall, finding three seats thankfully not too far away from the arena.

"I wish we could have gotten better seats to see Serena's contest debut, but guess these will have to do," Ash said in resignation.

"Pika," Pikachu said, patting Ash on the head sympathetically.

"At least there are screens around the Hall," Clemont said, pointing out to the many screens. The inventor then noticed that Bonnie was trying to look for something on her seat, with Dedenne helping her. "Bonnie, what are you doing? Did you drop something?"

"I'm trying to find the glow casters, but there doesn't seem to be any!" Bonnie said, panicking a little. "How are we going to vote for Serena without them?"

Ash couldn't help but laugh a little. Of course Bonnie would think like that. "This isn't like Showcases, Bonnie. The public's only here to watch and cheer. Contests have judges that decide who wins and who loses."

That moment, the light dimmer as several spotlights focused on the stage below, and the crowd went from murmuring to downright roaring.

"Look, it's about to begin!"

That moment, a woman in her late twenties entered the stage. She had fair skin and shoulder-length brown hair that curled up at the ends, was wearing a white sleeveless crop top that exposed her

midriff,, knee-length blue pants, and a pair of sandals. She tapped her mic a few times before speaking.

"Welcome everyone to the beginning of the Tandor Contest Season!" the woman replied, and the crowd exploded into a multitude of cheers. "My name is Jillian Meridian, and I shall be your host! Now, let's give a big applause to the three judges that will evaluate our wonderful coordinators!"

Jillian waved her free arm to a trio of booths with three people on it.

"Our first judge shall be Kevlar Town's own Nurse Joy!" Jillian continued.

"It's a pleasure to help," the blue haired nurse happily said.

"Next is the Venesi City Gym Leader, who also happens a Top Coordinator as well as a top notch theatre actress, Rosalind!"

"Did she said Gym Leader?" Ash asked, as he eyed the next judge. It was a young woman with a really bizarre appearance: half her hair was black and straight, and the other half was white and wavy. She was wearing a thigh-length dress, similar to the pink one Serena used to wear, except it was half white and half black and had a white cravat, with each short sleeve of the opposite color, a pair of shorts, one half white and the other half black, a white sock on one leg and a black one of the other, and shoes of the sock's opposite colors.

"Grazie!" Rosalind said, standing up, and started to wave at the public. "I can't wait to see what these new coordinators are capable of!"

"Hmmm..."Ash said, as he checked information on Rosalind on his Pokedex. While it wasn't unusual for a Gym Leader to be a contest judge -Fantina came to mind- they only did it in special occasions, like a Grand Festival, but Jillian made it appear as if Rosalind was a regular. How could she do that, and still be a Gym Leader? He

hoped she wasn't like Fantina and simply closed the Gym when she felt like it. "Oh, I see."

"Hm? Did you say something, Ash?" Clemont asked.

"I was looking information on Rosalind," Ash replied. "Here it says that Rosalind is one of Tandor's "Big Three", the three toughest Gym Leaders, all of them from East Tandor. Rosalind can afford to be a contest judge on a regular basis since she doesn't take challengers that have less than five badges. And since she has a pretty good victory track, the Pokemon League allow her to put such restriction."

"Interesting. I tell people not to challenge my Gym until they have four badges, but I mostly mean it as a recommendation. I guess other Gym Leaders aren't as flexible," Clemont mentioned.

"And last but not least, the S-Rank Connoisseur, Ambrose Reigns!" Jillian finished.

When Jillian introduced him as a Connoisseur, Ash expected somebody like his friend Cilan or his rival Burgundy, but Ambrose looked nothing like them: a broad shouldered man in his late thirties with short spiky black hair and a stubble, rather than the waiter-like uniform, Ambrose was wearing a plain black short sleeved shirt and a pair of jeans.

"Psche. Let's see if these kids can impress me," Ambrose said, as if he was expecting to be disappointed.

"And with that, let us commence! The coordinator who wins this contest shall earn the Kevlar Ribbon!" Jillian said, showing the ribbon to the crowd. "Five ribbons are needed for the Tandor Grand Festival on Venesi City, so whoever wins this contest will have an early lead over their fellow coordinators! Now, let's give a warm welcome to our very first coordinator! From Vaniville Town in the region of Kalos, Serena Gabena!"

...

Serena took a deep breath, and walked onto the stage. Time to show the public the fruits of her experience and hard work. She grabbed a pokeball, and tossed it into the air.

"Braixen, go!"

The pokeball opened up, releasing a wave of flames. The flames then condensed into single ball, which took the shape of a fox-like humanoid pokemon, before dispelling completely, revealing mid-evolved Serena's starter.

"Brai brai!"

"Time to make people smile! Braixen, begin with Flamethrower!"
Serena ordered.

Braixen ignited her wand, and started to use the most well known fire-type attack. Though rather than streams of flame, Braixen would release them in the form of rings or coils, almost looking like a Fire Spin rather than a Flamethrower, sometimes making them clash against each other, or firing straight streams of fire through them.

"Very good! Now follow up with Hidden Power!"

Braixen summoned multiple energy orbs of swirling light of many colors, spinning in a circle.

"Combine them with Flamethrower!"

Once again, Braixen released a coil of flames from her wand, pushing the multicolored orbs upwards.

"And for the big finish... Fire Blast!"

Braixen breathed a massive wall of flames that quickly took the shape of the kanji of fire, and send it upwards. Once it touched the Hidden Power orbs, they exploded in a shower of multicolored sparks, almost mimicking fireworks.

The public broke into loud cheers and applause, and Serena and Braixen made a polite bow as a thank you for their support. The public's reaction filled her with hope and confidence.

"And Serena opens the contest with quite a strong showing, setting the bar pretty high for the rest of the coordinators!" Jillian said. "Now let's see if the judges agree with the public!"

"Serena and Braixen's display was simply spectacular, perfectly showcasing their skill and experience," Nurse Joy said.

"A magnifico display! The use of the fire was so daring! I love it!" Rosalind excitedly said.

...

Back in the stands, Ash, Clemont and Bonnie were just as happy to see that Serena had pretty much aced the appeal round.

"Yes! She's doing so great!" Bonnie cheered.

"Well, of course she is. The Appeal Round of a contest is very similar to the Freestyle Performance. Serena is past the point of losing here," Ash confidently said.

They weren't really paying attention of what the third judge was going to say, since they assumed that he'd say something similar to the other two.

Boy were they wrong.

...

The spotlight focused on the last judge, and Serena was waiting eagerly for his evaluation.

"Watching your display left me completely stunned..." Ambrose began, much to Serena's joy. "... stunned, because I never imagined

somebody would have the nerve to think that such a boring and basic showcase would be enough to get a high score!"

Serena gasped, and she wasn't the only one.

"You know, just because you used a Fire-type Pokemon doesn't mean that you have to stick solely to Fire-type moves! Pokemon can learn a wide variety of attacks!"

"W-What? But I..." Serena stammered.

"But you what? Thought that because you've done showcases, contests would be the same? Yeah, you can see it's not the case! Now get the hell out of the stage, we're on a schedule and there are plenty of coordinators to judge!"

"Y-Yes..." Serena said, before returning Briaxen, and walking away from the stage, as a deafening silence reigned over the Contest Hall. Her mind was in a dazed state, still reeling and shaken from Ambrose's verbal beatdown. Did she fail that badly?

"Uh..." Jillian was trying to get the mood back up after Ambrose's savage verbal beatdown killed it almost completely. "Well, Ambrose's quite the hard judge to please! Maybe the next coordinator will do better? Everybody, let's welcome the next contestant, Sayaka Nami from Tsukinami Village!"

As Serena returned to the Coordinator's Box, she crossed paths with Sayaka, wearing a haughty smirk on her face.

"Does it sink now, Serena? What you're up against?" Sayaka mocked. "Now watch and learn how a true coordinator wows both the audience and the judges."

Serena didn't say anything, trying her best to ignore her rival, and returned to the waiting area. There, Vitor was waiting her, a look of concern plastered on his face.

"Hey," the boy said. "You okay?"

"Y-Yes, it's just... I wasn't expecting to fail my first contest so badly," Serena said, still shaken and a little saddened. Her mind was reviewing Braixen's performance. She knew something like that would have earned a lot of points in a Kalosian Showcase, but that apparently wasn't enough here.

"Hey, maybe you didn't fail. The other judges liked your performance," Vitor reassured her. "And for all it's worth, I think it was amazing. If you weren't able to impress him, I don't think what I'm going to do will do it then. Let's see if the Tsukinami girl does better."

Serena looked at one of the screens hanging from the ceiling of the waiting area, which displayed Sayaka, about to begin, a pokeball already in her hand.

"Heed my call, Luxi!"

The pokeball opened, releasing the pokemon among a storm of cherry blossom petals.

Sayaka's chosen Pokemon was a small creature, looking like a dog with rabbit features. It had a light gray body, whose forelegs, muzzle, ears and tail -which looked like a squirrel's tail- were green. Its neck was golden, and also had a pair of golden dots among its eyes, which appeared to be permanently closed, like those of an Abra or a Cyndaquil.

Serena and Vitor immediately took their Pokedex in order to check this new Pokemon.

"Luxi, the Lucky Pokemon. Dragon/Fairy. Simply being around a Luxi is said to increase one's fortune, which, alongside its rarity, made it for a valuable and sought out Pokemon. Ceramic statues of them are good luck charms."

"Wow... that's quite the impressive Pokemon..." Serena said, amazed.

"She has to be an excellent trainer to catch a Pokemon so rare..." Vitor added.

The public seemed to be just as wowed, since very few of them have seeing a Luxi in the flesh, making Sayaka's smirk widen.

"Alright Luxi, let's start with Energy Ball!" Sayaka ordered.

"Lux!" Luxi happily yipped, opening its small mouth to form a green sphere of energy which it threw into the air.

"Now, Thunder Wave!" Sayaka ordered.

Luxi's body started to crackle with electricity, as it redirected lightning bolts towards the Energy ball, still flying into the air, even if its ascension was beginning to slow down, until it stopped completely.

"Bathe it with Dragon Rage!" she commanded.

Luxi took a deep breath, and released a stream of blue, purple and fuchsia flames towards the falling electricity-imbued Energy ball, giving it a coat of flames.

"And finish with Protect!"

Luxi was encased inside an energy bubble of its own creation just seconds before the Energy Ball crashed on top of it, producing an explosion of green light, yellow lightning bolts and blue and purple flames, with the Pokemon in the middle.

Like with Serena, people got up to cheer and clap.

"And Sayaka manages to meet up with the expectations set by Serena, and then some!" Jillian cheerfully said. "But let's see if the judges agree with such assesment!"

"I do agree with that statement, Jillian," Nurse Joy said. "We only saw two coordinators so far, but the two of them were so talented!"

"Indeed! Sayaka made such a masterful use of color and lights in her display!" Rosalind gushed.

Sayaka nodded and smiled. Two out of three. She then directed her gaze towards the last judge, Ambrose.

"Luxi is quite the rare Pokemon. Only the most skilled and determined trainers are able to get their hands on one," Ambrose began. Sayaka's smile widened, basking on the connoisseur's adulation. "However, if you think that having a rare Pokemon is going to be enough to become a Top Coordinator, you're sorely mistaken. Being a coordinator is a matter of talent and hard work, not just rare Pokemon!"

Sayaka's smile dropped. "W-What? But I-" she tried to articulate a reply, but Ambrose cut her.

"In fact, I'm sure that you didn't even catch that Luxi. You're from one of Tsukinami's two founding ninja clans, so your family must be pretty loaded. Let me guess, your rich parents bought that Luxi for you? Well, if there's one thing your parents won't be able to buy is the talent needed to become Top Coordinator. Now shoo."

Shock was replaced by pure anger at such an insult. Sayaka's face was burning red, and it almost looked like steam was pouring out of her ears. "WHAT? How dare you! I demand you to-"

"Didn't you hear me the first time? I said 'shoo'. Like I said to the other brat, we're on a schedule and you're making other people wait," Ambrose dismissively said, as he gestured her to leave the stage already. "Perhaps there's somebody with some smidge of talent among this sorry lot..."

An angry Sayaka recalled her Luxi, and stomped her way back towards the waiting area.

"Wow, that Ambrose guy is hard to please," Vitor said, letting out a whistle.

"Try 'impossible'," Serena added. "Sayaka's performance was great, I daresay better than mine, yet that guy reacted as if watching it made him lose several years of his life," Serena mentioned. While she wasn't going to voice it out loud, she was now feeling better over the verbal beatdown she got from him. Not because she enjoyed seeing her unpleasant rival getting chewed-well, that too; somebody needed to knock that arrogant girl down a peg or two-, but because that means that her performance wasn't so bad after all.

Though, that dig about her rich parents was uncalled for. Rich or not, Serena could see that Sayaka was somebody who was both genuinely talented that worked hard to hone her skills.

The rest of the coordinators were called for the Appeal Round one by one. Some were good, others, not so much. Yet Ambrose's judgement were negative to the point of being caustic.

"You call that a dance number? Because to me, that Leafeon looked like it was having a seizure. If your Pokemon is sick, take it to a Pokemon Center."

"Watching your Lombre flailing its limbs without rhythm nor reason made me long for a tall glass of Arbok poison."

"The point of the Appeal Round is to captivate the audience with an eye catching performance. Your Spritzee fluttering around aimlessly was a cure for insomnia."

"I knew that I chewed that other girl for trying to come up with a fancy Pokemon but... a Chynimunk? Seriously? Couldn't you catch something a bit less overwhelmingly mediocre?"

It was now Vitor's turn.

"Come out and play, Pahar!"

Vitor's Pokemon was a red bird whose wings were ended in yellow feathers, white belly surrounded by a yellow circle, and a trio of yellow feathers on its forehead. Serena once again checked her Pokedex to look for info on this new Pokemon.

"Pahar, the Cinder Bird Pokemon. Fire/Flying. They are intelligent and are commonly kept as pets. They can even be taught to talk, although not to the degree of Chatot." The Pokedex said.

"Huh. Interesting Pokemon," Serena said to herself.

"Pahar, Will-O-Wisp!" Vitor ordered.

Pahar spread its wings, summoning several blue and white balls of fire that started to spin around it, slow at first, then faster and faster.

"Now, use Air Cutter!"

Pahar's wings started to glow with a blueish white light, right before he flapped them, releasing several blades of wind towards the fireballs spinning around. Whenever a blade of air crashed against one of the blue spheres of fire, it produced a flash of blue light, followed by a cloud of sparkly blue smoke.

Once the scenery was set, Vitor gave the next command." Fly around those clouds and use Flame Burst!"

Pahar then started to fly around the resulting sparkly clouds, making intricate maneuvers around them. Then, it opened its beak, forming a fireball within it, before throwing it into the air. The fireball then burst into multiple streaks of fire that fell down to the ground, finishing its performance.

For a beginner like Vitor, his showcase was rather good. Perhaps not good enough to make it to the next round, but acceptable. And indeed, while Nurse Joy and Roslind had nothing but kind words for the Moki Town native, Ambrose was much less kind.

"So, setting a bird on fire is what passes for a showcase this days. Disgraceful."

Vitor merely sighed, returned his Pahar, and walked back to the waiting area, as Jillian called the next contestant.

Unlike Serena and Sayaka, the coordinators that came after them barely reacted to Ambrose's harsh to the point of being insulting criticism. Guess the shock of his words kinda died off after hearing it so many times.

About an an hour later, the Appeal Round came to an end, and all the coordinators were waiting in the Contestant's Box. All eyes were trained on the screen, showing Jillian, who was about to speak again.

"Those were amazing performances, don't you think so? Unfortunately, only the best eight contestants can go onto the next phase, the Contest Battle!" Jillian said. "Now if you turn your attention to the monitors, you will see which coordinators earned the highest score!"

Eight faces appeared on the monitors, with their respective scores under them. The images were arranged from the highest score to the lowest. Sayaka was the first, Serena was third, and Vitor managed to snag the very last spot.

...

"Yes! Serena passed to the next round!" Ash said, jumping from his seat in excitement.

"Pi-Pika!" Pikachu added, sharing his trainer's joy.

"So did Vitor!" Clemont pointed out. While he was rooting for Serena first and foremost, both he as well as Ash and Bonnie were happy that the Moki Town boy did pretty good as well.

"Too bad the ninja jerk managed to score first place," Bonnie lamented, crossing her arms.

"Well, you have to admit that, regardless of her attitude, she's a pretty good coordinator," Ash said, as he sat down on his seat, before he smiled again. "Then again, the spot on the Appeal Round matters little. Even if Serena didn't rank first, she's now in the Contest Battle phase, and with all her experience and training, I'm sure she'll sweep the competition."

Jillian once again tapped her mic to draw everybody's attention. "Now, time to begin the second phase of the contest! Our coordinators will engage each other in a Contest Battle using one Pokemon each! They will have five minutes to execute beautiful attacks and combinations to make the opponent lose as many points as possible! To win, a trainer must have more points than their opponent when the timer reaches zero, make the opponent lose all their points, or knock the opponent's Pokemon out! Our first two coordinators fighting will be Vitor, from Moki Town, versus Nico from Nowtoch City! Five minutes on the clock! Begin!"

"Eletux, come out and play!" Vitor said, sending his starter.

"Go, Feleng!" his rival, another boy with short green hair, said, sending his Pokemon. It was a little cat with white fur and two stubby tails, with the top of its head, its back and front paws were half red and half dark brown. Each of its tails was one of those two colors as well.

Ash pulled out his Pokedex to scan the new Pokemon.

" Feleng, the Kitten Pokemon. Normal. Although small and weak, it can manipulate other Pokemon just by giving them a pleading look and meowing cutely. "

The fight started even, but soon it became evident that Vitor would be the winner, as his opponent lost points at a faster rate than he did, and overall, Eletux seemed to be dominating the battle. Vitor

had been diligent with his training, given that Eletux knew how to use Double Team and Charge Beam, two attacks Ash didn't remember using during their double battle with Natalie and Theo.

With a well aimed Water Gun, Nico's points dropped to zero. A buzzer rang.

"Nico has no more points left! The winner and first semifinalist is Vitor!" Jillian announced, as the main screen showed Vitor's face with Eletux besides it, with the word "WINNER" under it in big, bold letters.

"Yes!" Vitor cheered, pumping his fist. "Way to go, Eletux!"

"See? That's what I was talking about," Ash began. "Vitor scored the lowest of all the eight finalists, yet he managed to win his battle and advance to the semifinals. That's why I'm sure Serena is going win this even if she didn't score the highest during the appeals."

"And now, for the next battle, Trey from Bealbeach City versus Sayaka from Tsukinami Village!" Jillian announced, as the two coordinators took their respective spots. Sayaka's rival was a blond guy wearing sunglasses dressed like a stereotypical surfer. "Five minutes on the clock! Begin!"

"Glaceon, heed my call!"

"Lombre, time to show off!"

"A Glaceon. So that's the Pokemon Sayaka is going to use for the Contest Battles," Clemont mentioned.

"Too bad Serena can't use Braixen. It would be an easy win if she could," Bonnie said.

Sayaka managed to get an early lead even quicker than Vitor. Her strategy consisted on using Hail from the very beginning, let the enemy attack first, dodge their attacks, and countering.

"Boy, that Glaceon is really fast. The way it dodges..." Bonnie began, as she watched how Glaceon dodged a Bubble Beam in such a casual way it was almost insulting.

"I guess it's because that Glaceon's ability is Snow Cloak, which makes it faster during a snowstorm," Clemont explained. "That's why Sayaka had it use Hail from the beginning."

"Glaceon, Shadow Ball!" Sayaka commanded.

Glaceon opened its mouth, forming a sphere of pure darkness in front of it, before firing the sphere of shadows towards the already weak Lombre, blasting it backwards.

"Lombre, no!" Trey cried. A buzzer then rang.

"Lombre can no longer fight! Sayaka is the winner!" Jillian announced, as the main screen changed to display Sayaka and her Glaceon as the victors.

"Another unworthy adversary falls before my skill," Sayaka said, before returning her Glaceon and walking away from the stage.

The next battle was between a girl with blond hair named Zoe, and another girl with pink hair named Tina. Zoe used a Fortog that defeated Tina's pokemon, a green chrysalis with the face of a pink bear, and pink insect wings poking out of its sides. Once again, the Pokedex revealed what this new Pokemon was.

"Cubblfly, the Love Bug Pokemon and Cubbug's evolution. It scatters pollen and seeds in order to help flowers grow. It always smells like flower petals."

...

While Serena was the first one to perform during the Appeal Round, now she was stuck with the last fight. As she walked towards one

side of the battleground, she took a deep breath to calm herself down.

" *Come on, Ash helped you train for this. You can do it,*" Serena told herself

At the other side of the stage was her opponent, a boy the same age as her with dark purple short hair named Alex. He had used a Birbie on the Appeal Round, but she couldn't tell what Pokemon would he use now.

"And now, for the next battle, Alex from Rochfale Town versus Serena from Vaniville Town!" Jillian announced. "Five minutes on the clock! Begin!"

"Sylveon, go!" Serena said, releasing her Fairy-type Pokemon, emerging around pink clouds that burst into a shower of sparkles of the same color.

"Misdreavous, show them what you're made of!" Alex said, sending his Pokemon, come came out from a dark vortex. "Begin with Shock Wave!"

"Mis!" Misdreavous said as its body started to crackle with electricity, before it fired multiple streams of lightning towards Sylveon.

"Shock Wave can't be avoided, but it can be countered! Sylveon, stop it with Swift!" Serena ordered.

"Veon!" Sylveon cried, waving her feelers, releasing a flurry of golden stars that blocked every single one of Misdreavous' lighting bolts.

"And Serena manages to nullify Alex's attack!" Jillian commented, while Alex's points dropped.

"Oh no!" the boy cried, taking his hands to his head.

"Our time to attack! Fairy Wind!" Serena ordered.

"Misdreavous, quick-" Alex was about to say, but his Ghost-type was hit by Serena's attack, costing him even more points.

"Fairy Wind again!" Serena ordered, and Sylveon repeated her last move.

"Misdreavous, block that with Shadow Ball!" Alex commanded.

The Screech Pokemon formed a sphere of darkness among its stubby arms, and tossed it towards the incoming sparkly pink wind. The two attacks clashed, resulting in an explosion of darkness and pink sparkles. This time, it was Serena who lost points.

"Alright, I didn't want to use it this soon, but let's go for our combo! Use Will-O-Wisp!"

"Dreeee!" Misdreavous sang, as it summoned several blue fireballs that rotated around itself, before sending them towards Sylveon.

"Sylveon, dodge them with Double Team!" Serena said.

"Veon!" Sylveon cried, as two dozen duplicates appeared around Misdreavous. Some of them were taken away by the blue fireballs, but it seems that none of them found the original. Alex lost even more points.

"M-Mis?" the Screech Pokemon whimpered, looking around the many Sylveon copies.

"Sylveon, Fairy Wind again! Rapid fire!" Serena ordered.

Every Sylveon began to bombard Misdreavous with Fairy Wind. Once the attack hit, the original would switch with a copy, and repeat the process. Every time Misdreavous was hit, Alex's points would drop further and further.

"Misdreavous, quick, dispel those copies with Psybeam!" Alex ordered.

Misdreavous tried to do so, but every time it charged the attack, it was interrupted by a Fairy Wind smacking it from a blind spot.

The buzzer rang.

"Alex's points are down to zero! That means that the winner, and last semifinalist is Serena!" Jillian announced, as the main screen changed to show Serena's victory.

"I did it," Serena said, letting out a sigh of relief. "I won my first Contest Battle!"

...

Right after the match, Serena walked towards her defeated opponent to congratulate him for a good battle and to wish him good luck for his next contest.

"YES! Go Serena!" Ash shouted, pumping his fists into the air.

"Show them who's boss!" Bonnie added.

"Nenene!" Dedenne cheered as well.

"Look, they're about to show the next matchups," Clemont pointed out as the main screen began to shift.

The matches were Serena vs Tina followed by Sayaka vs Vitor.

Serena won her match just as easily as the first one, despite fighting against a Pokemon with a type advantage. It was obvious that the girl, Tina, was much less experienced, and her Fortog didn't have that much training. She appeared to be a rookie trainer, just like Vitor, but with either less skill or work ethic.

Then, it was time for the second match of the semifinals, Vitor vs Sayaka. It was obvious whom Ash and co. would support this time around.

"Come on Vitor, you can do it!" Clemont cheered.

"Put that jerk in her place!" Bonnie added.

"Show her what you're made of!" Ash shouted as well. "Don't let her intimidate you! You can beat her!"

Clemont turned at Ash, a bit confused by what his friend just said. "Do you think Vitor feels intimidated?"

"Probably. It's obvious that Sayaka has an advantage in experience, and she will use such fact to demoralize Vitor," Ash explained.

"You don't think Vitor can win?" Bonnie asked.

"I didn't said that," Ash said, as he looked at the two coordinators. "Though Vitor will have to work much harder if he plans to overcome Sayaka's experience. I believe he can win this."

"And now, for the second semifinals battle, Vitor from Moki Town versus Sayaka from Tsukinami Village!" Jillian announced, as the two coordinators pulled out their pokeballs. "Five minutes on the clock! Begin!"

"Eletux, come out and play!"

"Glaceon, heed my call!"

Eletux appeared among a storm of yellow lightning bolts, while Glaceon emerged from a tornado of snow.

~Vitor (Eletux) VS Sayaka (Glaceon)~

"Glaceon, Hail!" Sayaka ordered.

"Glaaaaaaa!"

Glaceon started to glow with a light blue aura as it reared its head back, summoning grey clouds above the battleground. Soon, a

hailstorm formed.

"Eletux, use Thundershock!" Vitor commanded.

"Tux!"

Eletux's yellow tail bulbs crackled with yellow electricity, releasing several bolts of lightning towards Glaceon. Sayaka merely smirked. "Glaceon, stop it with Shadow Ball!"

Glaceon opened its mouth once again, creating a sphere of shadowy energy, before firing it towards the lightning bolts. The two attacks collided, resulting in an explosion of yellow bolts and dark purple streaks of energy. Vitor lost almost one quarter of his points.

"And Sayaka expertly counters Vitor's attack resulting in a spectacular contrast of lights and shadows!" Jillian commented.

"And that's just the beginning," Sayaka said, before thrusting her open hand forward. "Glaceon, use Hyper Voice!"

"GlaaaaAAAAAAAAA!" Glaceon yelled, amplifying its voice into a powerful sonic blast.

Vitor, however, wasn't going to just stay there and take the attack. "Dodge it with Double Team!"

"Tux-tux!"

Eletux created almost two dozen illusionary duplicates, with half of them being instantly destroyed by the Hyper Voice, each destroyed illusion bursting into a shower of sparkles. This time, it was Sayaka who lost points, almost not as much as Vitor.

"And not only Vitor dodges Sayaka's attack, but manages to turn it into a visual display of sparkles!" Jillian commented. "And with so many copies remaining, what will be Sayaka's next move?"

Sayaka, however, remained as cool as her Pokemon. "Glaceon, stay clam and don't take your eyes away from the enemy," Sayaka commanded her Ice type. "The hailstorm will reveal the real one."

While the hailstorm wasn't strong enough to destroy the Eletux copies, it did made the real one flinch whenever he was damaged by the falling ice. Something neither Sayaka nor her Pokemon missed.

"There it is! Glaceon, move closer and use Icy Wind!" the Tsukinami Village native ordered. Glaceon rushed forward as cold mist spilled over its mouth.

"Eletux, counter it with Water Gun!"

Eletux expelled a stream of water from his mouth as Glaceon breathed a wave of cold wind. The Water Gun was instantly frozen into ice, but it didn't stop its momentum, and the frozen water continued towards Glaceon.

"Dodge it and keep moving forward!" Sayaka ordered.

At an almost imperceptible speed, Glaceon took less than a second to sidestep the chunk of ice coming towards it and return to its original track. This cost Vitor another few points.

"Now Quick Attack!"

Glaceon's speed increased, leaving a trail of white light behind it. Before Vitor could issue another command, Glaceon slammed into Eletux, sending it skidding backwards on its back, costing Vitor's even more points.

Meanwhile, at the stands, Ash, Clemont and Bonnie watched the match. Clemont and Bonnie had begun cheering Vitor, but their cheers became less and less enthused as the battle progressed and made it clear that Sayaka was going to win. Vitor continued to desperately trying to scratch more points from Sayaka's

scoreboard, but the ninja expertly turned all of Vitor's attacks against him, making him lose more and more points.

"Just as I feared. Vitor is good, but not good enough to beat her. If the match continues this way, she'll win for sure," Ash said in resignation, as he continued to watch the battle, which was nearing its conclusion.

"Eletux, Charge Beam!" Vitor commanded.

"Glacion, counter with Shadow Ball!" Sayaka ordered.

Eletux's raised his longest tail, the bulb at the end glowing with a yellow light, before firing a single bolt of electricity towards Glacion, who countered the electric attack the same way it did before. When the two attacks clashed, it resulted in yet another explosion of yellow bolts and dark tendrils, draining the last of Vitor's points.

The buzzer rang.

"Vitor's has lost all his points! The winner of this match is Sayaka!" Jillian announced, as the screen changed to reflect the result.

Vitor's body visibly slumped, and lowered his head before returning Eletux.

"Good job, buddy. Maybe next time," he whispered to him as he turned back and walked towards the changing room, his time on his very first contests already over.

Sayaka also returned her Glacion, and wordlessly walked towards the waiting area.

Bonnie let out a defeated sigh. "Boy, what a pity, Ash was right. Vitor lost."

"Yeah. That Sayaka is a force to be reckoned with," Clemont noted, as he adjusted his glasses.

"Oh well, even if it sucks that Vitor didn't make it to the finals, at the very least we'll see Serena kicking that girl's butt!" Bonnie said, as the idea of Serena being so close to her first contest victory renewed her good mood. "Right, Ash?" she asked.

Ash at first didn't answer. But then, he turned towards Bonnie, and smiled. "Of course. Sayaka is pretty good, but Serena is much better than her. Serena's going to wipe the floor with her."

...

Meanwhile, back at the waiting area, as she heard Jillian announce a ten minute break to give Sayaka and her Glaceon time to rest, Serena took a deep breath, trying to prepare herself for the battle to come. Most people competing here were not only rookies when it came to contests, but people who became trainers very recently, such as Vitor. Sayaka, however wasn't one of them.

She had been keeping a close eye on the East Tandorian girl, rightfully pegging her as the most dangerous opponent so far. The girl had a keen mind for strategy, and knew how to keep a cool mind when dealing with unforeseen situations. And her Glaceon was both strong and very well trained and groomed. Sayaka wouldn't be as easy as the two opponents she had to face before.

"Plus, just like how I've been watching her fighting style closely, she more than likely did the same with me, and her mind is now coming up with ways to defeat me and Sylveon," she reminded herself.

Speaking of the devil, Sayaka entered the waiting area that very moment. The two coordinators locked gazes. The East Tandorian smirked.

"Funny thing how many people used to be here a few hours ago. But all of them fell one way or another, and now, it's only you and me," Sayaka noted. "And soon, it will only be me."

Serena scowled. "Do you think you can intimidate me?"

"Please. I don't need to lower myself to such dirty tactics to achieve victory. My skill and hard work are more than enough to deal with you," Sayaka replied, crossing her arms. "I was merely stating a fact."

"I saw the way you treat the opponents you beat. You dismiss and insult them after you beat them, as if they were the lowest of the low! So yes, excuse me if I think you're not above such dirty tactics!" Serena snapped at her.

"You said it yourself. *After* I beat them, not *before*," Sayaka pointed out, taking Serena aback.

"And in the case you happen to face them again in another contest, they'll feel intimidated by you, making your victory all the easier," Serena retorted. "I wasn't born yesterday, you know."

Sayaka's smile vanished, replaced by a dismissive scowl. "If they can't withstand the pressure of being a coordinator, then they shouldn't be here to begin with. Everybody here comes with one goal in mind: to win. And I'm somebody willing to do everything that doesn't go against the rules to achieve said goal."

"Even if that means trampling over other people?" Serena asked.

"Those people would be willing to trample over me if I didn't do it first," Sayaka replied. "You know, I may not be that familiar with the world of Kalosian Showcases, but I did hear that their environment is just as cutthroat and competitive as contests. I'm unable to understand how somebody like you managed to reach the the very finals of the Master Class."

"Because being a performer isn't about winning or popularity or whatever cynical people like you may think. In order to be a good performer, one must be able to inspire others, to give them strength and advice. To make people smile," Serena began. "To lift them up when they're down, not to kick them further like you do!"

"Yes, I'm sure all the people you defeated to get to the finals feel very uplifted right now," Sayaka laughed.

Before the conversation could follow any further, they were interrupted by Jillian speaking once again. "Time for the contest's final battle to begin! Coordinators, please head to the stage!"

"Guess the time for words have passed. Prove me of your convictions' superiority in the battlefield then," Sayaka said, as she walked towards the stage.

"Oh, I plan to," Serena said, following her.

...

Ash, Clemont and Bonnie watched Serena and Sayaka move towards the opposite ends of the battleground, as they intensely stared each other down. They could tell that there was more at a stake in this battle than a simple ribbon.

"Coordinators, send your Pokemon!" Jillian told them.

"Sylveon, go!"

"Glaceon, heed my call!"

Serena's Pokemon emerged around pink clouds that burst into a shower of sparkles of the same color, while Sayaka's came from a tornado of ice.

"The final Contest Battle begins now! Five minutes on the clock! Begin!"

~Serena (Sylveon) VS Sayaka (Glaceon)~

"Glaceon, Hail!" Sayaka ordered.

"Glaaaa!"

Once again, grey clouds formed above the battleground, pelting everything below it with a constant rain of icy bits.

"Sylveon, use Fairy Wind!" Serena commanded.

"Syl!" Sylveon replied, as she began to flap her feelers, generating a gust of sparkly pink wind towards Glaceon.

"Dodge, and get close to Sylveon!" Sayaka ordered.

Once again, Glaceon seemed to develop supernatural speed with the way it dodged Sylveon's attack, while rushing forward Serena's Pokemon. This made Serena's points to drop a little.

"Quick Attack!" Sayaka said next.

Glaceon's speed picked up, its legs moving so fast they were little more than a blur, while leaving a trail of fading white light behind.

"Sylveon, now! Double Team!" Serena called.

Sylveon's body flashed white for a second, before two dozen copies littered the battleground. Glaceon's Quick Attack slammed against one of the copies, vanishing it. Due her failure, this time it was Sayaka who lost points, her score being the same as her rival. Sayaka sneered, but she was far from impressed.

"The other fool tried the same strategy, and it won't-"

"Quickly Sylveon, Fairy Wind again!"

All the copies repeated the same move as they did before, even if only one of them was real. Neither Glaceon nor Sayaka could tell which attack was the real one, and Glaceon took a hit as a result, making Sayaka's points to drop even further.

"Yes! Keep it up, Sylveon!" Serena cheered.

"Don't let that pink eyesore get away from you! Glaceon, get close and stop her with Icy Wind!"

"Protect!"

Cold mist poured from Glaceon's closed mouth, until it opened it, releasing a gust of freezing air, just as Sylveon encased herself inside a green energy bubble, safe from Glaceon's attack. Sayaka sneered as her points dropped even further.

"And with a well timed Protect, Serena's Sylveon avoids yet another attack! Sayaka started strong, but Serena seems to be in control of the match right now!" Jillian happily commented.

"Now Sylveon, Fairy Wind again!" Serena ordered.

But much to Serena's confusion, Sylveon started to glow with a pink light, as it spread her feelers outwards. An orb of swirling white and pink light formed in front of Sylveon's face, before she used her feelers to push it forwards. The amazed public burst into cheers.

"Wait, that wasn't Fairy Wind, was it?" Bonnie asked, excited.

"Not at all! It was Moonblast! Sylveon must have learned it mid fight!" Clemont explained, just as excited.

"Yes! Serena's even closer to victory!" Ash said, thrusting his fist forward.

Sayaka, however, wasn't intimidated in the slightest. "Dodge it and get closer with Quick Attack!"

Once again, Glaceon's Snow Cloak ability allowed it to easily dodge the attack, before rushing forward towards Sylveon at great speed, costing Serena more points.

"You won't be able to dodge this! Sylveon, use Swift!" Serena ordered.

Sylveon jumped into the air and waved her feelers towards the incoming Glaceon, releasing a flurry of golden stars that homed on the Ice-type Pokemon. Sayaka, however, smirked as if she was expecting it.

"Glaceon, Mirror Coat!" Sayaka yelled., causing Serena to gasp.

"Sylveon, quickly, Protect!"

Glaceon skidded to a halt, canceling the Quick Attack, as its body started to glow with a blue light. The golden stars hit the Ice type Pokemon squarely, costing Sayaka even more points, but the East Tandorian wasn't worried. Glaceon's body glowed with an even brighter light, before it released a wave of destructive energy towards Sylveon.

Sylveon, however, was unable to use Protect in time, and the powerful attack completely engulfed her, costing Serena so many points, her score was now lower than Sayaka's.

"Sylveon!" Serena cried, watching her badly wounded Fairy-type trying to get back to her feet. "Sylveon, are you okay?"

"Sy... Syl!" the Interwinning Pokemon replied, breathing heavily.

"Good! Now Sylveon, use Moonblast!" Serena commanded.

Sylveon's body started to glow pink once again as she spread her feelers outwards, forming another orb of swirling pink energy that she launched towards her fellow Eeveelution.

"Glaceon, counter it with Shadow Ball!" Sayaka ordered.

Glaceon opened its mouth, forming an orb of pure darkness, before firing it towards the incoming Moonblast. The two attacks clashed, resulting in an explosion of pink beams of light and dark purple tendrils. Serena's score dropped even further. One more good attack from Sayaka and it would be over for her.

"Time to finish this!" Sayaka said. "Glaceon, get close with Quick Attack!"

"Gla!"

Once again, the Fresh Snow Pokemon rushed forward, leaving a trail of white light behind.

"I won't make the same mistake again! Sylveon, counter with Swift, then prepare a Protect!" Serena ordered.

"Syl-VEON!" Sylveon cried, as she waved her feelers at Glaceon once again, sending a flurry of golden stars in its direction, before encasing herself inside a green protective bubble.

Sayaka, however, didn't order anything. Glaceon took Sylveon's Swift head on, costing the ninja more points, before Glaceon slammed uselessly head on against Sylveon's barrier, losing even more points, her score being similar to that of Serena. Meaning that, if Serena managed to land one more hit, the match would be hers!

"Sylveon quickly, use Moonblast! Even with Snow Cloak, it won't be able to dodge from such close distance!" Serena ordered, and Sylveon prepared the attack as quickly as she could.

However, Sayaka wasn't somebody who made such rookie mistakes. Even if she had to lose quite a lot of points, in the end, she got what she wanted, and now was ready to put an end to the match.

"Iron Tail!" Sayaka yelled.

"What?"

Glaceon's tail began to glow with a silvery light, and the Fresh Snow Pokemon slapped Sylveon with its metallic tail, causing her to cancel the Moonblast, sending her reeling backwards. Serena's points dropped, and the buzzer rang.

"Serena's points are down to zero! The winner of this match, and winner of this Contest, is Sayaka from Tsukinami Village!" Jillian announced.

Serena blinked, speechless. She took a couple seconds to register what Jillian just said.

"No..." Serena said almost in a whisper. How could she lose against this girl of all people?

"You said you wanted to make people smile," Sayaka said, as she recalled her winning Glaceon. "Well, look at the bright side. This victory is going to make me smile a lot! Hahahaha!"

Serena gritted her teeth but didn't raise to the bait. Sylveon then walked towards her, and wrapped one of her feelers around Serena's hand.

"Syl..." she cried, as if apologizing for losing.

Serena shook her head. "It's okay, Sylveon. You did your best and that's what matters. Next time, we'll do better."

Moments later, the three judges and Jillian were in front of Sayaka, all of them on a podium, with Rosalind holding an open box in her hands with the Kevlar Ribbon on it.

"Congratulations on your victory, Sayaka," the Venesi City gym Leader said. "We wish you luck in your future contests as well!"

"Thank you," Sayaka said, taking the ribbon. "But luck is for those who lack talent."

"And thus, the first Kevlar Town Contest comes to an end! I hope you have a great time, and see you next time!" Jillian said, officially ending the contest.

...

Half an hour later, the group was out of the Contest Hall, with Serena back in her traveling clothes. Ash, Clemont and Bonnie were comforting her after her loss.

"Such a pity. You did so well, but you ended up losing in the finals," Bonnie lamented.

"Though, you did pretty great for your first contest," Ash said, placing a comforting hand on Serena's shoulder.

"It's okay. I know I did good. I'll win next time," Serena assured.
"Besides, it's not that I'm a stranger to losing. I mean, I also began my career as a performer losing. And losing even worse than now."

"You aren't going to cut your hair again, are you?" Bonnie asked.
"Because you look so much better with long hair!"

Serena couldn't help but giggle at the young blonde. "Don't worry, I won't plan to this time."

"Boy, that ninja girl is tough," Ash commented. "Not even with Sylveon learning that new move were you able to beat her."

"Sometimes learning a new move mid-battle, or even evolving, it's not enough to win," Clemont said. "Unforeseen factors can throw a wrench in the opponent's plan, but they can only carry you so far."

"So, what do we do now? It's a bit too late to continue our travel. The sun is beginning to set," Serena pointed out.

"How about we spend the rest of the day relaxing? Maybe we could let out Pokemon out, play with them, have some fun...?" Ash suggested.

"Wait, you, Ash Ketchum, are suggesting for us to *relax*?" Serena asked in mock shock. "I thought you'd want to train or something."

"Hey, after this, I'm sure training is the last thing you want to do right now. Plus both your and your Pokemon could use some relaxation."

To rest properly is just as important as training!" Ash stated.

"Guess we can't argue with that," Serena said. "Come on, let's go."

Before the group left the Contest Hall behind, Ash had one last thing to say.

"Hey, Serena?" Ash asked.

"Hm?"

"I agree with Bonnie. I think long hairs looks really good on you," Ash earnestly said.

"Oh," Serena replied, though it sounded almost like a squeak. Her cheeks turned a little pink. "I'll make sure to keep it long then."

Author's Note: Yep, Serena lost. Despite her experience in showcases, it was simply not enough for her to just walk in and get the ribbon. But hey, I'm sure that now that she got a taste of what contests are like, she will do better next time.

And Vitor is back, after a mere chapter of being absent! Yeah, he's going to be one of Serena's rivals. I wanted at least one of Serena's rivals to be a boy, hence why I had Vitor do contests instead of Natalie, despite the female player character doing the contest/showcase is the norm in the anime. That also allows me to give Ash a female rival in Natalie, since his other two rivals, one of them being Theo, will be male.

And speaking of rivals, Vitor isn't the only rival to show up here, since Sayaka meets her debut! One thing I always felt that Serena was missing was a more bitchy and ambitious rival. She's basically a combination of Dawn's rival Ursula (her best rival, fight me if you think otherwise) and oneshot character Amelia, with some elements of Kagami Tsurugi (from "Miraculous Ladybug") and Kaguya Shinomiya (from "Kaguya-

sama: Love is War"). As shown in this chapter, Sayaka isn't going to be merely a roadblock to Serena in order to become Top Coordinator, but she will also challenge Serena's own beliefs and ideas. Those two, however, are only half of all the rivals Serena will have to deal with.

(Check the Ao3 version for a picture of Serena's contest dress, Vitor's contest costume, as well as Sayaka's casual clothes and contest dress, crappily drawn by yours truly)

You probably noticed that while I kept Nurse Joy, I replaced Mr. Contesta and Mr. Sukizo with Gym Leader Rosalind, and Ambrose Reigns, an OC of mine, to give contests a more original touch. I liked the idea of a Gym Leader being part of the judge panel, such as Fantina, even if she was only a judge during the Grand Festival. As for Ambrose, I liked the idea of putting an overly negative and caustic critic that's impossible to please. He's named after two of my least favorite wrestlers of all time, Dean Ambrose and Roman Reigns. Also, while I have nothing against Mr. Contesta, I can't stand the one-joke character that's Sukizo, who only ever says "remarkable" over and over again.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and don't forget to leave a review! Reviews are what keep non-professional writers such as myself going!

The Song of the Sea

Author's Note: To the guest reviewer who ends their reviews with "as a fellow amourshipper i have this to say to you and to all my fellow amourshippers around the globe who support amourshipping, amourshipper and proud, remember that dudes and dudettes and keep up the good serenaandashshipping work dude"... this is your last warning. Stop doing that shit or I won't accept your reviews anymore.

Chapter 5: The Song of the Sea

Kevlar Town

It was the next day morning, and the sun was shining brightly in the sky, not a single cloud blotting it. The sour taste of Serena's defeat at her first contest was no longer on either her or her friends' mouth, a good night of sleeping wiping it away and refilling them with the needed energy to continue the journey that it had just begun.

The group were now having breakfast at the cafeteria section of the Pokemon Center. The plan was to eat and then immediately head north to Nowtoch city. If they left the Pokemon Center early, they would be able to cross all of Owten Nook and reach Nowtoch City shortly after nightfall. Owten Nook wasn't a very long path, and with a good pace, they believed it could be crossed in a day.

Once they had finished breakfast and had all their Pokemon with them, the group was ready to leave. However, there was something that was going to delay their journey.

"Attention to Clemont, there is a videocall for you on Videophone 3!" Nurse Joy's voice said through the center's intercom system.

"A call to Clemont?" Ash asked, wonder who could be.

"Do you think it's dad, Clemont?" Bonnie asked.

"I had our dad fill for me as Gym Leader while I'm on Tandor," the inventor explained, already sensing Ash and Serena's incoming question.

The group walked towards the videophone in question, but when Clemont picked it up, the image that appeared on the screen wasn't that of the bearded burly man, but of a bespectacled girl with black hair combed in a pair of braids.

"Hello, Clemont. It's been a while," the girl greeted him.

"Lilia!" Clemont almost yelled. "It's such a surprise to see you! Not that I'm complaining but..." suddenly, a realization hit Clemont. "Wait a minute, Orangics! It was you, right? You suggested me to work on the new power plant they're building here."

Lilia giggled. "Guilty as charged."

"Oh, by the way, do you remember my sister Bonnie and my friends Ash and Serena?" Clemont asked, moving aside so Lilia could see them. Ash and Serena happily waved at the other girl, but Bonnie merely huffed and crossed her arms.

"Yes, I do. It's great to see you guys as well!" Lilia greeted back.

"By the way, how did you know I was here?" Clemont asked.

"I saw Serena on yesterday's contest on TV," Lilia began. "I didn't recognize her at first, even if her name and face rang a bell, then I remember she was one of your friends. Oh, by the way, Serena, I'm sorry that you lost that contest. Especially since you made it all the way to the finals."

"Thank you. But it's all in the past already," Serena said with a dismissive hand wave. "All that matters now is to make sure the same thing doesn't happen the next contest."

"So, I guess you want me to get to the plant as soon as possible, huh?" Clemont asked.

"Not at all," Lilia replied, much to Clemont's surprise. "With everything that happened on Lumiose, and the fact that you were on vacation in Kanto, none of us expected you to come to the region as soon as you did, so the work we need you for isn't ready yet, so if you want to take the scenic route, you're free to do so. Though, give me a call once you get close to Bealbeach City, okay?"

"I will," Clemont asked. "So, you know what I've been doing since we last met, but what about you, Lilia? What you've been up to? How did you end up on Tandor?"

"Well, it's a long story, but guess I have time to tell it since you're interested," Lilia began. "So, anyway..."

And thus Lilia started to tell Clemont everything she did right after the group parted ways with her, with Clemont listening intently and nodding, drinking every word the bespectacled girl shared.

"You know," Serena whispered to Ash and Bonnie. "Maybe we should let those two some privacy to catch up."

"Fine," Bonnie said with a roll of her eyes. "Though let's hope Clemont doesn't spend too much time talking. We need to continue our journey."

"Come on, let your brother talk if he wants to. You heard Lilia, it's not that we're on a schedule," Ash said.

"What about Serena's contests? Those ARE on a schedule!" Bonnie protested.

"The closest town where a contest will take place is Moki Town, and the contest won't start until a week and a half. More than enough time to reach Nowtoch City and for Ash to win his badge," Serena said.

"Fiiiine..." Bonnie huffed, crossing her arms. It was obvious that she wasn't going to win this.

"Nene?" Dedenne asked in confusion, but Bonnie didn't say anything.

"Come on, let's take a walk through the town. With my contest, we didn't have the chance to see it," Serena suggested.

As they walked out of the Pokemon Center, they were greeted by a sunny and beautiful day. Even if it was early in the morning, people were already up and ready for their daily work. One of those people was a Tandor Ranger, wearing a distinctive green and black uniform, that was stapling a sign to a wooden post. Moved by curiosity, the group of three went to read it.

WANTED: RICHARD HUNTER

LEADER OF THE DUNSPARCE BIKER GANG

Wanted for: Vandalism, Robbery, Property Destruction, Pokemon theft and trafficking.

Considered dangerous. If he or any of his gang members are seen, do not engage them, and contact the Tandor Ranger Corps immediately.

The poster had a picture from the shoulders up of the gang leader. He was a burly and broad shouldered man in his early forties, with jet black hair, a pronounced widow peak, and a goatee of the same color. A scar crossed his left cheek without touching his eye.

"Hey Ash..." Serena began, as the gears in her mind began to turn. "Those bikers we saw the other day through the Lakeside Path..."

"They all were wearing jackets with a Dunsparce on their backs," Ash recalled.

"Pika..." Pikachu nodded.

"And they were heading towards this very town..." Bonnie feafully said.

"People here doesn't seem to be very worried about a violent biker gang being here," Serena said, looking around. "Though, maybe they didn't stop here and went somewhere else."

"Even then, we should go to a Ranger Station and tell them we saw those bikers coming here, just in case," Ash said.

They remembered passing in front of the Ranger Station when they first arrived at the town, being close to its border with Lakeside Path. It wouldn't take them very long to get there. However, when they were close to their destination, something drew their attention.

"Selkid! Selkid!" it was a brown haired teen boy the same age as them yelling something, they guessed it was the name of a Pokemon. "Selkid, where are you?"

They decided to check what was wrong with the boy, given that he looked clearly distressed. "Hey, is everything okay?" Ash asked.

"No, not really," the boy replied. "You see, I had an argument with my Pokemon, Selkid, and... well, I got so angry I wasn't even thinking, and I told her something terrible..."

"And she ran away, right?" Serena asked. The boy nodded. "That's awful."

"Say, how about if we help you find your Pokemon?" Ash offered.

The boy's face beamed with you. "You would!?"

"Of course. I think we all had an argument or two with our Pokemon, and many times we say things we don't mean," Ash said.

"Weren't we going to go to the Rangers to tell them we saw those bikers?" Bonnie asked.

"We can do that later. I think this is a bit more urgent," Ash said. Serena nodded in agreement.

"Say, uh..." Serena began.

"Maury," the boy said.

"Maury, was this the last place you saw your Pokemon?" Serena asked. Maury nodded. She then looked at the path that went out of the town and into Lakeside View. "Maybe Selkid left the town...?"

"Let's check the Pokedex. Maybe knowing more about the Pokemon will give us a hint on where she may be," Ash said, as she introduced Selkid's name on his Pokedex.

"Selkid, the Sea Nymph Pokemon. Water/Fairy. They gather together on rocky shoals and sing together as a harmony. Their human-like voices can be misleading because they sound like a child lost at sea."

A picture of Selkid appeared on the screen. It was a vaguely humanoid Pokemon with blue skin and a white face and underbelly. It had dark blue arms ended on stubs, tiny fin-like feet, and a fish tail. It had a teardrop-shaped head, black eyes, yellow cheek marks and a yellow ruff around its neck.

"Hmmm... given that Selkid's a Water-type, she might wanted to go to a place with water, and Lakeside Path has a river of crystalline water," Ash began to ponder.

"Let's check there first. Maury, you stay here and continue looking in case Selkid didn't leave the town," Serena advised.

"Got it," Maury said with a nod. "Oh, before I forget! Selkid is also carrying a jewel with her. Make sure it doesn't get lost, she's very attached to it."

"Don't worry, you can count on us!" Bonnie replied. "Right Dedenne?"

"Nenene!" Dedenne happily agreed.

"Okay, Lakeside Path is pretty big. How about if we split to cover more ground?" Ash suggested. "Serena, take Bonnie with you."

"Very well then. Let's meet at the town's entrance in an hour," Serena said, as she and Bonnie went into another direction, leaving Ash alone.

"Alright. Birbie, I choose you!" Ash said, releasing the Tandor little bird.

"Birbie!" he chirped. He looked around, and realized that they were back on his former home. "Birb?"

"Listen Birbie, we're looking for a lost Pokemon," Ash said, as he showed Birbie his Pokedex, which was displaying a picture of Selkid. "She looks like this. We're going to look from the ground, and I want you to look from above. Can I count on you, Birbie?"

"Bir!" the Eden Bird Pokemon chirped, and wasting no time, took off into the sky.

"Oh! Selkid is a marine Pokemon, so make sure to check the water!" Ash said, before he and Pikachu began their own search.

...

Lakeside Path

Meanwhile, on another part of the route, a scared Water and Fairy-type Pokemon wandered around the unknown zone, trying to find a way home. She was protectively clutching a gemstone between her small arms.

"Selkid..." the Pokemon whimpered.

Selkid was lost, away from home, and very scared. She had seen many Pokemon around, but she wasn't familiar with either of those and didn't dare to trust them. They were all small and didn't look dangerous, but she knew that appearances could be deceiving.

Then she heard it. The sound of water running. Was there water in this foreign and strange place? Deciding it was her best lead, Selkid ran as fast as her little feet allowed her too, still clutching her jewel and making sure she didn't lose it. She didn't know why, but she had developed a strong attachment with the round, shiny item, and felt an overwhelming urge to keep it close to her.

As she ran, she couldn't just hear it, she could now see the running water! For the first time in what felt like ages, Selkid felt hope. All she need to do was dive into the water, and the road home would be an easy trip from there. And the moment she reached the shore of the river, she dived headfirst into it.

Though, rather than the sweet feeling of water enveloping her body, all what Selkid felt was pain as her face slammed against something wet and slimy, but definitely solid, bouncing her back to solid ground, dropping her jewel in the process.

"ROG!" somebody angrily said.

Selkid rubbed her pained face, before she looked forward and realizing that the wall she had crashed against wasn't a wall, but a Pokemon that was now stepping out of the water. It was large, with a bulky body ended in a tail supported by four robust legs. Its underbelly was purple, and had stripes of the same color on its back. It had red cheeks, and eyes of the same color.

And said eyes were looking at her with a hate filled glare.

"FOL!" the Pokemon roared, as he menacingly advanced towards Selkid, clearly taking Selkid crashing into it as a personal attack.

"S-Sel..." Selkid tried to apologize but the larger Pokemon wouldn't hear it.

It raised one of its forelegs, and its fingers started to glow with a sickly purple aura. Selkid's eyes grew wide upon noticing it was a Poison-type attack. Given the colors, it was obvious that this Pokemon was also part Poison. Just her luck.

"SEEEEEEL!" Selkid wailed as she jumped away, just in time to avoid the powerful Poison Jab move.

Her enemy moved towards her once again, preparing yet another Poison Jab. It was obvious that it wasn't going to just leave her alone. Meaning that, even if she had no faith in her combat abilities, Selkid had to fight.

"Seeeel..." Selkid brought her arms together, summoning a small orb of water, before tossing it at her enemy. "KID!"

The orb of water sailed forward, but her larger enemy merely swatted it away with its other hand as if it was nothing, and thrust its other, poison-coated hand into Selkid, hitting her squarely in the gut.

"SEEEEEEEEEEL!" she cried, the pain from the super effective attack being unbearable.

Before her vision turned too blurry to be of any use, she saw a round, dark blue Pokemon flying above her.

...

Meanwhile, at another part of the route, Serena and Bonnie were looking for the missing Selkid, without much success. They decided to stick close to the river, given that Selkid might be close to it.

"Selkid! Selkid!"

"Selkid! Where are you?"

"Nenenene!"

"Come on Selkid, come out, we just want to help you!" Serena called, before letting out a sigh. "This is useless. We've been yelling Selkid's name for a long time, but no sight of her."

"You know, if Selkid got into the river, she could have swim into the sea," Bonnie pointed out.

"No, I don't think she'd do that. Even if she's on bad terms with her trainer now, no Pokemon would abandon their trainer like that," Serena replied. "Selkid is probably waiting for Maury to come back to her and apolo-"

"SEEEEEEEEEEEEL!"

Serena was interrupted when she and Bonnie heard a high pitched cry of pain, which definitely wasn't human. The two girls traded a look.

"Serena, do you think...?"

"Only one way to know, let's go!"

As the two girls rushed towards the direction of the cry, they took no time to finally see Selkid, being beaten by a Pokemon that looked like a Fortog, but was much larger and had a more intimidating appearance.

"It's Selkid! And that other Pokemon is beating her!" Bonnie said, pointing at the battle.

Serena's hands quickly reached for one of her pokeballs, before tossing it in the direction of the two Water-type Pokemon.

"Pancham, go!" Serena said, as the Playful Pokemon emerged from the capture device, landing on the ground in front of Serena.

"Pancham, protect that Selkid from the bigger Pokemon! Use Dark Pulse!"

"Pan-CHAM!" Pancham cupped his paws, before thrusting them forward, releasing a stream of dark and purple energy towards the blue and purple Pokemon, pushing it towards the edge of the river.

"Good job, Pancham!" Serena said, before pulling out her Pokedex. "Let's see what we're up against..."

" Folerog, the Long Toad Pokemon, and Fortog's evolution. Water/Poison. Folerog need to remain damp to survive, so they are found in areas with plenty of water such as rivers and lakes."

Meanwhile, Bonnie rushed towards Selkid, picked her up, and quickly rushed back to Serena's side.

"Serena, I have Selkid!" Bonnie said, as she ran towards the older girl.

"Well done! Quickly, give her to me," Serena said, taking the small Pokemon from Bonnie's arms, and cradling her on her own. "She looks badly wounded. That Folerog must give her quite the beating."

"Seeel..." Selkid whimpered.

"But... why? What did Selkid do to deserve that?" Bonnie asked.

"I don't know. Maybe This is Folerog's territory saw Selkid as an intruder," Serena said. "Though that doesn't matter now."

"Even then, that's not a reason to be such a bully!" Bonnie replied, glaring daggers at the wild Folerog, who was now snarling at Pancham.

"It seems that Folerog won't leave unless we force it to," Serena declared.

Folerog decided it was his turn to attack. Its dewlap swolled up, before it opened his mouth, releasing a wave of purple sludge from it. Pancham dodged it by making a few backflips.

"Well done, Pancham! Now use Arm Thurst!" Serena ordered.

"Pan..." Pancham jumped into the air, cluthing one of his paws into a tiny fist. However, instead of glowing white as usual, it glowed yellow and started to crackle with electricity. "CHAM!"

When Pancham's fist collided with Folerog, it produced an explosion of yellow sparks that electrocuted the Water and Poison-type Pokemon, causing it to cry in pain.

"Wait... that wasn't Arm Thurst! That was Thunder Punch!" Serena said, rejoicing over Pancham learning a new move. Especially one that was so useful with the situation at hand.

"First Sylveon and now Pancham! Your Pokemon are on fire!" Bonnie praised.

"Nenene!" Dedenne added.

...

Selkid didn't know what was going on anymore. She could hear the noise of a battle going on, but she didn't care. She was now between the arms of yet another human. Her instincts told her that she was in danger and she should leave, but she didn't have any strength left to do so.

Though... there was a part of her that didn't want to. Despite her whole body in pain, being wrapped in the arms of that human felt... nice. Warm and comfortable. And the more she basked in that sensation, the less her instincts told her she was in danger.

...

"Well done, Pancham! Now Stone Edge!" Serena said.

"Cham!" Pancham said, before he slammed both paws into the ground, summoning a row of rock pillars towards Folerog, slamming the Long Toad Pokemon back into the water.

However, contrary to what Serena was expecting, that wasn't enough to drive the angry and persistent Folerog away, as the blue and purple Pokemon crawled out of the water once again, looking even more pissed.

"Fole! Folerog! Rog, rog!" it began to loudly croak.

There were three splashing sounds, and Serena, Bonnie and Pancham saw how three Fortogs leaped out of the river and onto the grassy ground.

"Uh-oh. The bully called some friends for help..." Bonnie said.

"P-Pan!" Pancham said, taking a step back as the three newcomers quickly moved to surround him. He looked back at Serena with eyes that begged her to do something about that. "Pan, pancham!"

The Fortogs immediately fired several Water Gun at Pancham, who dodged them as well as he could by doing cartwheels, but he wouldn't be able to dodge forever.

"Sylveon, go! Protect Pancham!" Serena said, toying a second pokeball.

The Interwinning Pokemon materialized in front of the little panda, and immediately encased herself inside an energy bubble, which managed to block the attacks before it disappeared.

"Sylveon, Pancham, watch out!" Serena warned.

"ROG!" Folerog loudly croaked, as it charged towards Sylveon, Poison Jab already prepared to strike.

"Pikachu, Electroball!"

Before Folerog could strike Sylveon, he was blasted by a sphere of yellow electricity. Folerog croaked in pain as the electricity coursed through its body, causing all the Fortogs to look back at its bigger counterpart in worry.

That moment, Ash, followed by Pikachu and Birbie, arrived at the scene. The two Pokemon, noticing the battle, quickly joined Serena's Pokemon, ready to face the group of Water/Poison types from the river.

"Ash!" Serena said, rejoiced to see her friend.

"We got Selkid, but she was being attacked by those wild Pokemon!" Bonnie quickly explained.

"I see. It's a good thing that I send Birbie to explore from the sky, otherwise he wouldn't have find you guys," Ash said. "Alright, let's end this battle with the next move! Birbie, Gust!"

"Birb!" Birbie chirped, as he elevated into the air and started to flap his tiny wings, produced a decently sized tornado that moved towards the Folerog and the Fortogs.

"Pancham, Dark Pulse! Sylveon, Swift! Aim at the Gust!" Serena ordered.

"Pancham, cham!"

"Syl!"

Pancham and Sylveon fired a beam of dark energy and a flurry of golden stars at Birbie's Gust. The three attacks merged into a tornado of darkness and glowing yellow stars. The combination attack blasted the Folerog and the Fortogs, producing an explosion of darkness and golden stars, hurling the four Water and Poison type Pokemon back into the water. It seemed that this time they decided they had enough, as they quickly swam away without ever looking back.

"Let's hope they learned their lesson," Bonnie said, as he watched them disappear into the distance. She was about to rejoin Ash and Serena, who were setting Selkid on the ground, before she caught something glinting among the grass. Crouching down, she reached

her hand to grab the item in question: it was a marble, dark blue in color with a pink core. Bonnie knew it was no ordinary marble, as she had seen many of its kind. It was a Mega Stone! "Cool!"

While Bonnie did that, Serena decided to focus her attention on the wounded Selkid.

"Good timing, Ash, Come on, help me with Selkid. She's very injured," Serena said, as she gently placed the Water and Fairy type on the grass.

"Sel..." she whimpered.

"Don't worry Selkid, this will make you feel fine," Serena said, as she looked for something on her backpack, before she pulled out a Potion. "Now this may sting a little."

Serena started to spray Selkid across her body, the Sea Nymph Pokemon flinching and wincing whenever the medicine soaked her. However, in a few seconds, as her body absorbed the medicine, the pain started to recede, and her strength started to come back little by little. She was a little confused on what had happened, but she didn't care. She was grateful she was feeling better.

"Pikapi?" Pikachu asked Selkid.

"Kid," Selkid replied, nodding weakly.

"I think Selkid feels a little better now!" Ash said.

"Hey guys, look what I found!" Bonnie said, as she ran towards the two teens, showing her finding.

Both Ash and Serena immediately recognized what the small marble was, and gasped in shock.

"Whoa! A Mega Stone!" Ash exclaimed.

"Where did you find it?" Serena asked.

"It was near the river. It was a good thing that I saw it, given how hidden it was between the grass," Bonnie proudly said, before taking a look at the stone. "So, what Pokemon do you think can use this stone to Mega Evolve?"

That moment, Selkid noticed the stone, and her eyes grew big.

"Sel! Selkid!" she began to cry, as she tried to reach the Mega Stone with her short arms. "Sel!"

"Pika?" Pikachu asked, before he turned towards Ash and pointed at the Mega Stone Bonnie was holding. "Pi, pika!"

"I think Pikachu says that Mega Stone belongs to Selkid," Ash said.

"Hey, didn't Maury said that Selkid had a jewel? Maybe that's what he was talking about?" Serena asked. "Maybe she dropped the Mega Stone when she was attacked by that Folerog."

"So Selkid can Mega Evolve? Cool!" Bonnie said, before handing the stone back to Selkid. "Sorry, I didn't know this was yours. Here, you can have it back."

A bit surprised that the human was returning her jewel so easily, Selkid merely grabbed it, clutching it against her chest, and nodded. "Selkid."

Bonnie beamed at her. "You're welcome!"

"Well, given that Selkid is safe and she has her Mega Stone back, let's go back to Kevlar Town," Ash suggested.

The girls nodded, and the group, plus Selkid, returned to the small town.

...

Turns out they didn't need to get to the town perse, as Maury had apperently grown tired of looking there, and was now looking for

Selkid on Lakeside Path as well. He took no time to notice Ash, Serena and Bonnie walking towards him, and he quickly went to greet them.

"Hey!" Maury said, waving at them.

"Maury! We're back!" Ash said, waving back.

"And you found Selkid! Oh, you guys have no idea how much I owe you! I thought I had lost her for good!" Maury said.

"Yes. Thankfully, now you can tell her how sorry you... feel..." Serena began, as she felt something that made her lose track of her thoughts. "Selkid?"

Selkid was hiding behind Serena's leg, grabbing it with one arm while she held the megastone with the other. She was trembling, and looking at Maury with eyes filled with nothing but pure fear.

"Serena? What's wrong?" Ash asked.

"It's Selkid... she's shivering!" Serena said, before looking at Maury, and fixed him with a hard stare. "Just... what exactly did you do to her that caused her to run away from you?"

"Um, I already told you! We got into an argument, and I yelled at her, and she ran away!" Maury said. "Now please, can you hand me Selkid back?"

Ash scowled. Serena was onto something. The Kanto native had seen enough arguments between a trainer and their Pokemon, and in almost every case, the Pokemon would be angry or upset at the trainer. But Selkid... she was paralyzed by terror.

"Ash, there's something here that doesn't feel right," Serena warned him.

"And I agree," Ash said, taking a step forward, placing himself in front of the girls as if to shield them from Maury. "Listen, let's head

back to Kevlar Town, and come with us to the Ranger Station. I'm sure they can sort this mess out and-"

"JUST GIVE ME THAT STUPID FISH ALREADY!" Maury exploded.

"Selkid!" Selkid flinched, clutching Serena's leg even harder.

There was a moment of silence, as Maury realized he had screwed up big time with that outburst.

"You aren't Selkid's trainer, are you?" Bonnie accused him.

Maury merely looked down, and chuckled.

"Tell me, do you have any idea how much that dumb fish is worth?" Maury began. "Selkid live deep under the sea, and they very rarely come out to the surface. And when they do, they tend to flee whenever a human being gets close, so they're very hard to catch. That's why Selkid are so valuable.

"And that's not even counting that Selkid's evolved form can Mega Evolve! So a Selkid with a Mega Stone would sell for almost ten times its original value!" Maury's expression then went from demented joy to cold anger. "So you'll understand that, if I tell my dad that I lost such a valuable Pokemon, he'll be very, very mad at me. So now, please, return that Selkid, before I get very, very mad at you."

"You despicable... wait a minute, you're working with those Pokemon traffickers, aren't you?" Serena asked.

"Very smart. Now you understand why I can't go to a Ranger Station. Enough chitchat. You're giving me that Selkid and the Mega Stone, or things are going to get ugly," Maury said, as he walked threateningly towards them.

"Pikaaaaa!" Pikachu seethed, as he released sparks from his cheeks.

"If you want that Selkid, you'll have to take her by force!" Ash shouted.

"Trust me, that won't be a problem!" Maury said, pulling two Pokeball. "Riolu, Primeape, KILL!"

"Braixen, go!"

"Pikachu, I choose you!" Ash said, before turning at Bonnie. "Bonnie, make sure Selkid is okay!"

"Got it!" Bonnie said, as she gently lifted Selkid and moved a few step back.

Pikachu jumped from Ash's shoulder onto the ground, as Serena's starter materialized near him, while Maury's two Fighting types appeared before them. Much to Ash and Serena's befudlement, Maury's Pokemon were wearing what appeared to be some sort of mechanical device strapped to their chest with a red Omega symbol.

Maury then pulled a small remote from a pocket, and smirked evilly at his enemies. "You guys have no idea what you're fighting against," he sinisterly said, before pressing a button.

The devices hummed to life as the Omega symbols on them light up, and the two Pokemon hissed in pain, closing their eyes and cluthcing their bodies, but remaining in place. They opened their eyes to reveal they were now bloodshot, and Riolu's mouth was twisted in a demented snarl.

"What... what are you doing to your Pokemon?" Serena asked.

"Improving them. Now, attack! Primeape, Karate Chop! Riolu, Quick Attack!" Maury ordered.

The two Fighting types shot like rockets, Riolu slamming its whole body against Pikachu and Primeape smacking Braixen with an open palm, sending both Pokemon rolling backwards.

"Pikachu!" Ash shouted.

"Braixen!" Serena cried.

"Keep attacking! Riolu, continue with Shadow Claw! Primeape, Frustration!" Maury said.

"RU!" Riolu screeched, as it leaped into the air, raising a paw that was coated in ghostly energy. Primeape's body, meanwhile, started to glow red as it charged towards the downed Braixen.

"Quickly, dodge!" Ash said.

"You too, Braixen!" Serena added.

Both Pikachu and Braixen managed to move from the spot they were laying on before another attack could hit. Riolu's Shadow Claw opened a small crater when it hit the ground, while Primeape opened several bigger ones in his temper tantrum.

"Such destructive power..." Serena said in horrified awe.

"Do you like that? That's thanks to the Muscular Enhancer, a little gadget our science division has developed. Activating it is the equivalent of several Sword Dances in a row. It also increases a Pokemon's aggression, but keeps them fiercely loyal to their trainer. You cannot beat my Pokemon when their offensive power is so high, they only need one hit to beat yours!" Maury boasted.

"We'll see about that! Pikachu, Thunderbolt!" Ash ordered.

"Braixen, Flamethrower!" Serena commanded.

Pikachu's cheeks started to produce yellow sparks as his body built up electricity for the attack, while Braixen waved her ignited wand at the two Fighting types.

"Braix!"

"CHUUUUUU!"

"Primeape, deflect that Thunderbolt with Thunder Punch, Riolu, push that Flamethrower back with Force Palm!" Maury ordered.

Primeape curled one of its hands into a fist, which was quickly coated in electricity, before thrusting it towards the incoming lightning bolt, deflecting it away, while Riolu's Force Palm generated such a powerful shockwave that it tore through the Flamethrower as if it was nothing, dispelling it instantly.

"You still don't understand how useless your Pokemon are against mine?" Maury taunted. "Primeape, Rock Slide!"

"PRIIIIII!" Primeape screeched, as it raised its arms, and summon a bunch of truly massive boulders above Pikachu and Braixen, before they launched themselves at the two Pokemon with the force of meteors.

Pikachu and Braixen ran in opposite directions in order to dodge the falling boulders, which were so big and heavy, the earth trembled whenever they impacted the ground. One of these boulders fell way too close to Braixen, and the resulting quake made them trip and fall facefirst.

"Braixen!" Serena yelled, as she saw how a gigantic boulder was about to crush her.

"Pikachu, Iron Tail!" Ash called.

"PI!" Pikachu replied, as he dashed towards the incoming boulder while his tail glowed with a metallic sheen, jumped into the air, and smashed the large rock to bits with a tail strike, allowing Braixen time to get back on her feet.

"Riolu, Quick Attack on Pikachu!" Maury ordered.

As Pikachu landed on the ground below, he was slammed by a blue blur which turned out to be Riolu. Pikachu was smashed against Braixen, and the two Pokemon were sent rolling on the ground backwards.

"Braixen!" Serena cried.

"Pikachu!" Ash cried as well, as one of his hands moved towards one of his other two pokeballs.

"You know, you could have been reasonable and give me that Selkid. But for making me waste my precious time, I think I'm going to take your Pokemon as well as a compensation, even if they aren't that great," Maury said. "Riolu, Blazing Kick on Pikachu!"

"RU!" Riolu once again jumped into the air, and raised a leg that was quickly coated in flames.

"Greninja, I choose-" Ash was about to say, but what happened next stopped his hand.

For some reason, while it was mid air, the fire around Riolu's leg petered out. Riolu then cried in pain, lost its balance mid-air, and crashed clumsily into the ground. The Emanation Pokemon tried to get back on its feet, but the moment it did so, it clutched its chest as if merely standing was causing it a great pain.

"Riolu! What the hell are you doing!?" Maury shouted.

Ash and Serena didn't know what was happening either, but they weren't going to let this opportunity slip away from their fingers.

"Pikachu, use Quick Attack on Riolu!" Ash commanded.

"Pika!" Pikachu said, as he dashed towards the writhing Fighting type, leaving a trail of fading white light behind him.

"Primeape, stop that Pikachu with Karate Chop!" Maury shouted.

Primeape moved to intercept Pikachu, as his right hand glowed white, ready to smack the yellow rodent with it. But just like with Riolu, Primeape stopped dead on its tracks and clutched its body, as unbearable waves of pain coursed through their bodies.

"Not you too! What the hell's wrong with you!" Maury yelled, just as Pikachu slammed into Riolu, sending it tumbling backwards.

"Can't you see it?" Serena asked. "That device you forced them to wear made them much stronger. But increasing their strength so much in so little time must have put an immense strain on their bodies, and that's taking a toll on them!"

"Riolu! Primeape! I don't care how much you're hurting right now, get up and finish this fight!" Maury hollered.

"You know, I actually feel bad for doing this to your Pokemon, but you leave us no choice," Ash said, fixing Maury with a harsh glare. "Pikachu, Thunderbolt!"

"Braixen, Fire Blast!"

"Pika-CHUUUUUUU!"

"BRAAAAAI!"

Pikachu released once again a powerful electric blast, while Braixen conjured a huge mass of flames shaped like the kanji of fire. In their current state, neither Riolu nor Primeape were able to move to dodge the two attacks, which added to the harm the Muscular Enhancer was causing, they were more than enough to defeat them for good.

"No... no!" Maury said in desperation, as he hastily returned his Pokemon to their pokeballs, before stumbling backwards. "You... you have no idea what you just did today! When my father learns of what you've done, it will be over for you! You'll see!"

And with that, Maury turned back and ran away as fast as he could, not towards Kevlar Town, but towards the nearby forest, disappearing among the trees. Ash and Serena decided that chasing him wasn't worth the effort.

Now that the danger was gone, Bonnie finally let Selkid go, gently placing her on the ground, while Ash and Serena walked towards them. Serena crouched, and gently patted Selkid's head.

"That's why you run away from him, didn't you?" Serena asked Selkid. "Sorry for not realizing of that sooner."

"Selkid..." Selkid said.

"But don't worry, I promise you that I'll help you return to the place you belong, and failing that, to find you a place where you will be cared for and will make you happy," Serena vowed.

"I think we should return to Kevlar Town and go to the Ranger's Station," Ash suggested. "Besides telling them we saw the bikers, we should tell them about Maury working for them, and what he was planning to do with Selkid."

"Agreed," Serena said, as she stood up. "Let's go."

...

Later, Ash and Serena brought Selkid to the Ranger Station, while Bonnie returned to the Pokemon Center to fetch Clemont and tell him everything that had happened. They were attended by the same Ranger that they had seen earlier putting up the poster of the Dunsparce Gang leader, and told them about how they had seen them on their way to Kevlar Town.

"Yes, more people claimed they've seen a group of bikers that matches the description of the Dunsparce Gang. We will make sure no incident happens as long as they are close to the town," the Ranger replied.

"About that," Serena said, and motioned to Selkid. "We had an encounter with one of their associates, some kid named Maury. He admitted to us that he worked for them and that he was planning to sell this Selkid."

The Ranger took a look at the Selkid, who whimpered and hid behind Serena's leg.

"I see. Selkid are extremely rare and hard to catch. It fits among the Pokemon they'd target," the Ranger said.

"Maury said that his father was one of the traffickers. Though he didn't look like member of the gang himself," Ash pointed out.

"Perhaps they were testing him before they let him become part of the gang officially," the Ranger replied. He then shook his head in disappointment. "Boy, to think they'd fall so low..."

"What do you mean?" Serena asked.

"The Dunsparce Gang has been a fixture of Tandor for many years, but they weren't too bad. Their crimes were pretty minor, like instances of harrasment or vandalism, and most of the time they kept to themselves, and never harmed any Pokemon," the Ranger began. "But when they started to dip their toes in the world of Pokemon trafficking... well, it was quite the surprise. Oh well, there's no point in mulling over that. It's our job to put an end to their operations and see that their members face justice."

"Indeed," Ash nodded. "So, what about Selkid? What are we going to do with her?"

The Ranger smiled. "That's easy. Selkids live in the sea, and while they don't do well on the surface, their sense of orientation underwater is almost unmatched. All we need to do is bring Selkid to a river, and once she reaches the sea, she'll be able to return to her home on her own."

"A river? Like the one in Lakeside Path?" Serena asked.

The Ranger nodded. "For example."

"I guess that's what you were trying to do when we found you, right?" Serena asked Selkid. "If it wasn't for that Folerog, you'd be already on your way home."

"Selkid..." Selkid nodded, and lowered her gaze.

"Well, it doesn't matter! Come on, let's escort her back to the river so she can go back home!" Serena stated.

...

Lakeside Path

The sun was beginning to set, casting an orange light over the mostly green and blue route, and soon shadows would follow.

At the edge of the river were Ash, Serena, Clemont, Bonnie, their Pokemon, the Ranger, and finally, Selkid. They were all looking at the white and blue Pokemon expectantly.

"Well, this is it," Serena said. "Get into the water, and you'll be on your way home."

"We made sure there are no more of those Pokemon that attacked you before!" Bonnie helpfully added.

"Fortog and Folerog are mostly diurnal Pokemon, so you won't run into any of them when the sun begins to set," the Ranger helpfully explained.

Still clutching her Mega Stone, Selkid took a step forward. She looked at the water, before turning around and giving one last look at the humans that had helped her. More specifically, Serena. She then looked at the Mega Stone as a whirlwind of conflicting emotions brewed inside her.

Selkid remember how she was forcefully dragged away from her home by those horrible humans. Being locked inside a cold, metallic cage, alongside other equally miserable looking Pokemon. She remembered the beatings she took when her captors tried to break her. Her finally escaping once she had the chance, only to run into those Poison-type Pokemon.

Then she appeared, like an angel send by the gods. She fought those Poison-type Pokemon, and then, alongside her partners, fought against one of her captors when he tried to claim her back. And now she was going to let her go just like that. Her recent experiences let Selkid believe that all humans were monsters, but this group had shattered her perception.

Taking one last look at the water, Selkid made a decision. Filled with determination, Selkid handed her Mega Stone to Pikachu, much to everybody's surprise, and walked away from the water.

"Pika?" Pikachu asked, not knowing what to do with the jewel.

"Selkid? What are you doing?" Serena asked.

Once there was enough distance between them, Selkid turned around, put on a brave face, and held her arms in a fighting stance.

The Ranger smiled. "It isn't obvious?" he asked. "Selkid wants you to capture her. But she wants you to battle her first."

Serena gasped in shock, and looked at Selkid. "Is that true, Selkid?"

"Sel!"

Serena smiled, before her expression turned determined as well, ready to meet Selkid's challenge. Pancham's capture came to mind, how the little panda refused to join her until she proved her worth to him. Despite her fragile appearance, it seemed that Selkid was stronger than she let on,

"In that case... Sylveon, go!" Serena tossed the pokeball forward, releasing her Fairy-type. Selkid tensed up. "Sylveon, use Fairy Wind!"

Sylveon waved her feelers, raising a gust of sparkly pink wind towards Selkid. Selkid crouched down, and used her tail as a spring to jump into the air. While she was airborne, she brought her arms together, and fired an orb of water at Sylveon.

"That was Water Pulse!" Clemont identified.

"Sylveon, dodge!" Serena called, and thankfully, the interwinning Pokemon moved aside, letting the orb crash against the grass. "Now that she's mid air, Fairy Wind again!"

Sylveon repeated the same maneuver, but this time Selkid was unable to evade. The sparkly pink wind hit her squarely, pushing her backwards and making her crash against the ground on her back. Still, that wasn't enough to put her down, and Selkid quickly jumped back to her feet.

"SeeeeeeeelKIIIIIIIIID!" Selkid yelled, as her voice formed a sonic blast that sailed towards Sylveon.

"Sylveon, Protect!" Serena called.

"Syl!" Sylveon cried, before enacing herself inside a green protective bubble, which nullyfied Selkid's attack.

"And that was Hyper Voice!" Clemont added.

"I don't understand, that Selkid is really strong, how is that we had to help her deal with that Folerog?" Bonnie asked.

"Well, from what you've told me, Selkid appeared to be both scared and suffering from trauma, meaning that she wasn't in the right state of mind to fight. But now..." Clemont said, as he adjusted his

glasses. "It seems that she cast all of that away, at least temporarily, so she can fight Serena at her best."

The battle continued. Selkid used another Water Pulse, which Sylveon countered with a Fairy Wind. Realizing that Sylveon was the stronger of the two, Selkid tried a different approach.

"Sel, sel, sel, seeeeeeeel..." Selkid started to intone a melody, as ethereal musical notes started to form around the battleground, slowly closing on Sylveon.

"That's Sing!" Serena said, as she noticed how her Pokemon was slowly falling asleep. "Sylveon, resist!"

"S-Syl..." Sylveon cried, trying to fight off the drowsiness.

"SeeeeeeeelKIIIIIIIIID!" Selkid interrupted her song, turning it into an Hyper Voice. Even if Sylveon wasn't completely asleep, she was impaired enough not to be able to move quickly, and the sonic attack hit her fully.

"Sylveon! Are you okay?" Serena called.

"Syl!" Sylveon cried. At the very least, the attack had snapped Sylveon fully awake.

"Good. Time to finish this. Sylveon, use Swift!" Serena ordered, motioning her hand forward.

"Syl-VEON!" Sylveon waved her feelers, releasing a flurry of golden stars that flew towards Selkid.

Selkid tried to run away in order to dodge them, but Sea Nymph Pokemon quickly learned that such attack was impossible to dodge as the stars homed on her, before she took the impact of the attack.

"Sel!" she cried in pain.

"Now, Monblast!" Serena ordered.

Spreading her feelers, Sylveon formed an orb of pink swirling energy, before launching it towards Selkid, who was getting back on her feet. The Water and Fairy type Pokemon was unable to dodge Sylveon's attack, and she was engulfed by an explosion of pink and white light.

"Pokeball, go!" Serena said, tossing an empty pokeball at Selkid.

The capture device found its mark, with Selkid being turned into pure energy and sucked into it. The pokeball fell to the ground, and wiggled for a few seconds, only to stop with a ding, signaling a successful capture. The Kalosian teenage girl walked towards the pokeball, and picked it up.

"Ta-da! I captured Selkid!" Serena said, holding the pokeball with both hands, as she showed it to the group.

"Awesome!" Bonnie cheered.

"Congratulations, Serena!" Ash said.

"Your first Tandor Pokemon!" Clemont pointed out.

"Good work, Serena. I'm sure you'll do a great job taking care of that Selkid," the Ranger said.

Given how long and frenetic day most of them had, they decided to return to the Pokemon Center in order to have dinner and get a good night of rest, so they could continue their journey the very next morning.

As they walked, Serena looked at Selkid's pokeball on her hand, and couldn't help but smile at the conversation she had with Ash a few days ago regarding her lack of Pokemon. Indeed, sometimes it was the Pokemon who chose the trainer, rather than the other way around.

...

Meanwhile, from an elevated terrain, there was blond woman wearing a sleeveless blue jacket with a Dunsparce on its back. From her vantage point, the woman had been watching the whole chain of events without fear of being seen. Events that she found could lead to great success for her group if they played their cards right. She opened the Pokegear on her wrist and dialed a number.

"Richard? This is Amber," the woman, Amber, said, before her lips curved into a smirk. "I saw something in Kevlar Town that you're going to find *mostly* interesting..."

Author's Note: And after Ash, Serena catches her first Tandor Pokemon! One a little more exotic than Ash's regional bird.

Those who have played Uranium probably remember Maury (or not, he was a very minor character and his sidequest is very easy to miss), and while he was a jerk there, there he got hit with a dose of Adaptational Villainy. It's all part of a subplot I'm planning involving the Dunsparce Gang (did you think that the group seeing a bunch of bikers a couple episodes ago wasn't going to come into play later?)

And Lilia makes her debut! (sorta) Though, given that I mentioned Orangics on the first episode, the fact that she was the one who requested Clemont to be hired shouldn't come as much of a surprise. Still, it will be a while until she makes an appearance in the flesh, so to speak.

Well, Selkid is now safe and sound, and will be helping Serena with her contests. But at the same time, the group has drawn the attention of a bunch of Pokemon traffickers. I'm sure they'll be okay :)

Well, with this over, our heroes can continue their journey towards Nowtoch City, since Ash is getting really impatient for his first Gym battle in Tandor. In the meantime, don't forget to leave a review!

The Three Warring Packs

Chapter 6: The Three Warring Packs

With no more delays, the group had finally left Kevlar Town and were on their way to Nowtoch City, where Ash could challenge his first Tandor Gym for a Gym Badge. To do so, they had to cross Route 2, also called Owten Nook, named after the Pokemon of the same name that made such place their home.

"So, according to the map, Owten Nook is a mountain pass," Serena began as she checked her tablet. "Fortunately, it's very easy to traverse by foot, and thus special climbing gear is not needed. Though it says that some slopes are a little steep, and thus they should be traversed with caution."

"Well, it's not that we're strangers to mountains, huh?" Bonnie asked.

"Yeah. Besides, what's a journey without some variety in the landscape?" Ash added.

While the path so far was completely flat grassland surrounded by trees, they could see a small mountain rising in the horizon.

"Hey, look at that!" Bonnie said, pointing to the canopy of a nearby tree, where several small Pokemon where perched on. Said Pokemon looked like small cats with tan and white fur, fluffy tail, a white ruff around their neck, and wings instead of front legs. They appeared to be sleeping.

Ash and Serena immediately pulled out their Pokedex to scan the new Pokemon.

"Owten, the Observer Pokemon. Normal/Flying. They are mainly seen at night, when they are looking for berries and other individuals of its species. They are known for their lovely singing voice."

"So, that's an Owten," Ash said.

"They're so cute!" Bonnie squealed, as expected when the group met a new Pokemon.

"You know, between this one, Birbie, and Selkid, Tandor has quite a few Pokemon that are known for their singing voices," Clemont pointed out.

"Hey, Serena, maybe you should catch one. Selkid could form a duet with an Owten, and use it in the Appeal Round of contests," Ash suggested.

"You know... that's not half a bad idea," Serena said. Catching a new Pokemon felt good, so she wasn't against the idea of getting another one so soon after Selkid. Plus, they seemed pretty nice and friendly, so no harm in getting close and ask nicely.

However, before they could do anything, they heard what appeared to sound like an explosion, followed by a minor quake. The Owten immediately woke up and flew away in terror.

"Wait, don't go!" Serena begged, disappointed at missing her chance to befriend and catch an Owten. She then looked towards the direction the explosion had come from. "What was that?"

"It came from the mountain," Clemont pointed out.

Then, they heard that noise again, except this time it wasn't accompanied by a rumble.

"It appears to sound like a Pokemon battle," Ash said. "And it's not very far away."

Ash immediately rushed forward, followed by his three companions - with Clemont complaining about running without reason-, until they finally found the battle in question: A Raptorch fighting and beating a Mankey. And commanding that Raptorch was no other than Natalie.

"Alright Raptorch, finish with Flame Wheel!" Natalie ordered.

"Rap rap!" Raptorch yipped, as it spun into a ball as its body was coated in flames. The spinning fireball slammed into the Mankey, hurling it backwards and making it fall on its back.

"Well done, Raptorch!" Natalie praised, before she pulled out a pokeball. "Now, time to catch it! Pokeball go!"

The group watched in awe how Natalie threw the pokeball... only to fly past Mankey on a big curve, before landing in the middle of some bushes.

"Oh crap, not again!" Natalie cried, as she ran after the pokeball. "That's my last pokeball! Raptorch, help me find it!"

The Fire Dino Pokemon obediently heeded its trainer's call and helped Natalie look for the pokeball. Unfortunately for her, while the duo was busy, Mankey got up, and seeing their predicament, the Pig Monkey Pokemon wisely ran away.

"Aha!" Natalie said emerging from the bushes, raising the pokeball on her hand as if it was a trophy. "Okay, now... OH COME ON!" she shouted when she realized that the Mankey had left. And just after that, Natalie noticed Ash and his friends. They awkwardly stared at each other, not saying a word or even moving, before Natalie spoke: "You saw that, didn't you?"

All of them (including Pikachu) nodded wordlessly.

Natalie groaned as she dragged her palm through her face. "Of course. As if it wasn't humiliating enough, this time I get an audience," she complained. "Oh well, at least this time I got the pokeball back."

"What do you mean 'this time'?" Clemont asked. "Do you have problem catching Pokemon?"

Natalie smiled awkwardly as she scratched her cheek. "Well..."

...

Natalie was in the middle of a grassland, her Raptorch having just defeated a Birbie.

" Good job Raptorch!" she said, before tossing a pokeball. "Pokeball, go!"

However, the pokeball sailed past Birbie, and fell among several bushes.

" What the hell?" she asked, pulling out another pokeball. "Pokeball, go!"

The pokeball once again sailed above the fainted Birbie, and hit the canopy of a tree instead. There were a chirp of pain followed by the rustle of feathers, as a flock of angry Birbie flew at her, their hostile intentions more than evident.

" AAAAAAAHHH!" she yelled, running away.

...

Natalie was next to a slope, her Raptorch having just defeated a Cubbug.

" Well done, Raptorch! Time to catch our first Pokemon!" Natalie said, before tossing a pokeball. "Pokeball go!"

But the pokeball sailed past the Cubbug, and went rolling down the slope.

" No no no no NO!" Natalie cried, taking her hands to her face.

...

Natalie was next to a river, her Raptorch having defeated a Fortog.

" Alright, THIS time I'm catching a Pokemon!" Natalie said, before chucking the pokeball with a little less force. "Pokeball go!"

Still, the pokeball sailed past the Fortog, and fell into the water.

" You have to be kidding me!" she screeched.

...

"... so yeah, thanks to my inability to properly toss a pokeball, I haven't caught any new Pokemon yet, and I lost every pokeball except this one," Natalie shamefully admitted.

"If that's a problem, you can always just walk to the Pokemon and touch it with the empty pokeball without tossing it," Bonnie pointed out.

"You can do that?" Natalie asked in shock. "I wish it would have learned of that earlier. Oh well, at least from all the fighting we've been doing Raptorch has gotten pretty strong. Isn't that right, Raptorch?"

"Torch!" the Fire Dino Pokemon yipped, happily wagging its tail.

"Say, have you ever fought against other trainers, or just wild Pokemon?" Ash asked.

"So far, only wild Pokemon. I didn't find any trainers to fight against yet," Natalie explained. "Then again, I just begun my journey!"

"Say, how about a Pokemon battle against me? You aren't going to do so well against a Gym Leader if you never fight against another trainer before," Ash suggested.

"Fight you? Yeah no," Natalie said, crossing her hands in front of her chest for added emphasis. "I saw what that Pikachu of yours can do, and I know you have another Pokemon which is just as strong if not stronger on top of being a Water-type."

"I won't use Pikachu or Greninja," Ash said, as he took out a pokeball, and tossed it, releasing Birbie. "I'll use Birbie."

Natalie narrowed her eyes at the Birbie. She looked as if she was trying to assess how strong the Eden Bird Pokemon was. If she reached the conclusion that Ash caught it back on Lakeside Path, the answer would be "not much".

"I caught Birbie not too long ago. I trained him a bit, but I haven't use him to fight against another trainer yet, so the experience would do him some good," Ash said.

"Bir, birbie!" Birbie happily chirped, ready to fight.

"Oh, if you're going to use a freshly caught Pokemon, then no problem!" Natalie said. "What do you say, Raptorch? Are you ready to fight a more challenging opponent?"

"Rap!" Raptorch yipped, letting out a small spark of fire from its mouth.

"Even if Birbie is a freshly caught Pokemon, he will be directed by a very experienced trainer," Serena advised Natalie. "You shouldn't keep your guard down."

"Don't worry, I won't," Natalie said, as she and Raptorch put some distance between Ash and Birbie.

Clemont, meanwhile, placed himself between the two combatants, ready to take the role of referee. "This will be a one of one fight between Ash and Natalie, with no time limit! However knocks the opposite side's Pokemon first wins! Ready? Begin!"

~Ash (Birbie) VS Natalie (Raptorch)~

"Alright Natalie, you can go first!" Ash offered.

"Very well then! Raptorch, begin with Mud Slap!" Natalie ordered.

"Torch!" Raptorch cried before turning around, and started to kick blots of mud at the Eden Bird Pokemon.

"Birbie, fly away!" Ash ordered.

"Birb!" Birbie chirped, as he took off, the mud missiles sailing below him.

"We missed!" Natalie cried.

"Ground type attacks aren't very effective against Flying-type Pokemon like Birbie," Bonnie pointed out.

Natalie slapped her forehead. "Dammit! How did I forget something so basic?"

"Birbie, Quick Attack!" Ash ordered.

"Bie!" Birbie chirped, before diving at the earthbound Pokemon, leaving a trail of fading white light behind him.

"Raptorch, dodge-"

However, Birbie turned out to be too fast, and Raptorch was unable to dodge in time. As a result, Birbie slammed into Raptorch, sending the Fire Dino Pokemon crashign backwards.

"Raptorch!" Natalie cried. However, much to her relief, her starter Pokemon quickly jumped to its feet. The brown haired girl sighed. "Good to see you're okay. Alright, time to counterattack! Flame Wheel!"

Raptorch spun his body into a ball, before coating himself in flames, and shot towards Birbie

"Use Gust!" Ash commanded in return.

Birbie took off once again, and started to flap his little wings as fast as he could produced a small tornado between himself and his rival.

The moment Raptorch tried to cross through the tornado it was trapped by the wind current, before it was pushed backwards, canceling the attack.

"It didn't work?" Natalie asked, gritting her teeth.

"Now Birbie, Air Cutter!" Ash ordered.

Birbie's wings started to glow with a dim blue light, before flapping them twice, producing two crescent-shaped blades of wind of the same color.

"Try Ember!" Natalie ordered.

"Rap!" Raptorch yipped, as it gathered flames inside its mouth, before releasing them in a flurry of small fireballs. The fire and wind attacks clashed against each other in the middle, producing a small explosion, followed by a cloud of smoke.

"Birbie, use Quick Attack again!" Ash ordered.

Birbie crossed the cloud of smoke at such speed, it blew a hole on it, before he slammed once again into Raptorch, sending the Fire and Ground-type Pokemon crashing backwards.

"Damn, not again!" Natalie seethed, fists clenched in frustration. "That Birbie surpasses Raptorch in speed, and is better at attacking from a distance than Raptorch, so the only way..." Natalie began to murmur, as an idea formed inside her head. "Hey, maybe this could work!"

The fact that Natalie had come up with a new tactic didn't go unnoticed to Ash, who smirked lightly, deciding to test the girl's creativity. "Birbie, Quick Attack again!"

"Birb!"

After flying up to put some distance towards Raptorch, who once again got back on its feet. Even if Raptorch was still able to fight, the

previous hits it had endured were starting to take a toll on its body. Birbie dove again like the world's most adorable missile, leaving yet another trail of white light that faded behind him.

"Raptorch, use Bite!" Natalie ordered.

Serena, Bonnie, and Clemont gasped at the order. And just as Birbie was about to slam into Raptorch for the third time, Raptorch opened its mouth and snapped its jaws around Birbie's round body. The momentum of Birbie's attack send Raptorch skidding backwards, but it took almost no damage from the attack.

"Birb! Birb!" Birbie cried in distress, as he tried to break free from Raptorch's tight jaws.

"Yes! We did it!" Natalie said, cheering with both fists raised, finally landing a hit while avoiding an attack. "Now Raptorch, Ember!"

While Birbie was still between its admittedly small jaws, Raptorch gathered fire inside its mouth, coating its jaws in it and setting the trapped Birbie on fire, before the Fire Dino Pokemon brought its head back, and violently slammed Birbie into the ground, sending Birbie bouncing back

"Oh no, Birbie!" Ash cried.

"That attack wasn't merely Ember! I think by using a Fire type move attack while using Bite, Raptorch learned Fire Fang," Serena observed.

"Really? That's awesome!" Natalie cheered.

"Are you okay, Birbie?" Ash asked.

In response, Birbie quickly jumped back to his feet, shook his head to snap out of his dizziness, and wiped some of the soot from his feathers.

"Birb!" he chirped.

"Good!" Ash said, before looking at Natalie, and smiled. "That was a pretty clever move, Natalie!"

"Well, when your options are taken out one by one, the solution becomes more apparent," she noted. "I wish I came up with that earlier."

"Don't worry about it. Being able to think fast in the middle of a battle is a skill that takes a lot of time to hone," Ash reassured her.

"Anyway, let's continue! Birbie, use Gust!"

"We're not going to let a little wind get in the way! Raptorch, run forward and get around the Gust!" Natalie ordered.

"Rap Rap!" Raptorch replied, kicking a cloud of dust as it dashed forward, but avoiding the tornado the way Natalie had instructed it.

"Well done! Time to strike now! Fire Fang!" Natalie ordered.

"RAAAAAP!" Raptorch cried, as it lunged at the airborne Birbie with its jaws wide open, orange and yellow flames pouring from them.

"Birbie, Flash!" Ash called.

Birbie's crest started to glow, before it exploded into a torrent of bright white light, blinding both Raptorch and Natalie. The human girl could shield her eyes in time, but given the close distance, Raptorch wasn't so lucky and was blinded, missing Birbie completely and crashing headfirst into the ground.

"Raptorch, quickly, get up before-"

"Birbie, use Air Cutter!" Ash ordered.

Birbie's wings started to glow with a dim blue light, before flapping them twice, releasing two more crescent-shaped blades of wind at the downed Raptorch, hitting it squarely.

"Raptorch, no!" Natalie cried.

"Finish with Quick Attack!" Ash ordered.

"BIIIIIRB!" Birbie cried as he rocketed towards the Fire Dino Pokemon, slamming against it for the third time, sending it flying against a tree with a loud crash, before falling down to the ground with a thud.

"Raptorch can't continue fighting! The winners are Ash and Birbie!" Clemont declared.

"Yes! Good job, Birbie!" Ash cheered.

"Birb birbie!" Birbie chirped, just as happy.

Natalie sighed sadly, and and walked towards her defeated starter. She pulled out a potion from her backpack, and sprayed her Pokemon with it. The wounds slowly began to vanish as Raptorch opened its eyes, sending its trainer an apologetic look. She smiled at it. "You did your best, Raptorch. Return and have a nice rest," she said, returning Raptorch to his pokeball. He then walked towards Ash. "Boy, you kicked our asses so badly with a freshly caught Pokemon. Guess that's what the difference in experience can achieve."

"Hey, don't feel so bad, Natalie. You and Raptorch did a phenomenal job," Ash reassured her.

"Yeah! Using Bite to stop Birbie's Quick Attack was super clever!" Bonnie excitedly added.

"Y-You think so?" Natalie asked, blushing a bit at the compliments.

"Sure! Besides, the only way to improve is to pit yourself against people that can challenge you," Serena said. "You may have lost, but both you and Raptorch came out of this fight a little wiser and stronger."

"Yeah... it never occurred to me using Bite like that, and thanks to that Raptorch learned Fire Fang, so yeah!" Natalie said, a little more upbeat. "Plus, you said it yourself, I can't expect to face a Gym Leader if I don't fight against other trainers."

"Speaking of which, if you're on this route, I take you're going to Nowtoch City?" Ash asked.

"You bet. It's the closest Gym from home, so I thought I could challenge it first," Natalie said. "You're going to challenge it as well, don't you?"

"Pretty much, yeah," Ash replied.

Natalie then looked at Serena. "By the way, Vitor told me that you're a coordinator. You should know that there's no Contest Hall on Nowtoch City, so you should head east instead."

"W-Well, I know, but-"

Natalie slapped her forehead. "Oh sorry, silly me. I can't believe I didn't realize of it sooner. You and Ash are together," Natalie said, making a cross with her index finger.

Serena yelped, and turned beet red, much to Bonnie's amusement and Clemon't confusion. "A-Actually-"

"Yeah, Serena and I travel together," Ash happily agreed, completely oblivious to Natalie's implication. Pikachu shot his trainer a flat look. "We've been together for a long time, since we met all the way back in Kalos."

"I see. It shows," Natalie nodded.

"Clemont and Bonnie have been with us for as long," Ash added, not wanting the rest of his friend to feel left out. "Many people like to travel alone, but I think it's more fun to do it with friends."

"Though, given that we're going to the same place, why don't you come with us?" Bonnie asked. "That way, we get to know each other better!"

"Plus, if we see a Pokemon that catches your interest, we can help you with the capture," Clemont offered.

"Sure, why not? It could be fun," Natalie agreed.

"Great! Nowtoch City Gym, get ready, because here come Ash and Natalie!" Ash said, pointing in the direction of the mountain in front of them. "Nothing can stop us!"

...

"What do you mean, the path is blocked?" Ash indignantly asked.

Unfortunately, there was something that did stop them. Because, after half an hour walking, they found the path blocked by a very large pile of rocks. There were a few Rangers directing some Pokemon that were working on removing the obstacle. Some of them they knew, like Mankey, Primeape, as well as others that didn't know, like a mole-like brown Pokemon with purple legs, and a massive yellow drill for a nose, that the Rangers were using to drill the rocks into smaller bits.

"Modrille, the Drill Pokemon. Ground/Dark. They hate being confined within any space and will always drill their way out of it. Trainers are advised to keep spare Poké Balls on hand," the Pokedex said after the new Pokemon was scanned.

"Just what I said. The recent tremors caused by the quarreling Pokemon in Passage Cave have caused a landslide, making progression impossible," the Ranger explained. "We're working as fast as we can to clear out the area, but it will be a few days until this path is transitable again."

"So that's what caused the tremor we felt before," Bonnie said.

"Hey Clemont, don't you have something among your gadgets that could help with the clearing?" a hopeful Ash asked.

"I'm afraid not. Had I know we would have encounter something like this, I would have devised something," Clemont admitted.

That was a bit odd, given that Clemont always seemed to have a gadget ready just for anything.

"Well, explosions are pretty good at removing debris, aren't they?" Bonnie deadpanned.

"Isn't there anything we can do? Our friends need to go to Nowtoch City so they can challenge the Gym there," Serena asked the Ranger.

The Ranger grabbed the peak of his green hat, and looked towards the west. "Well, you can always try to cross Passage Cave, given that one of its exits lead directly into Nowtoch City. But I wouldn't recommend it, given that it's currently mating time for the Pokemon living there, and they can get a little... territorial."

"If that's the only way to reach Nowtoch City, so be it," Ash said.

"In that case, make sure to have your Pokemon ready to battle. Once the native Pokemon sense you, they'll attack you on sight," the Ranger warned. "You'll find the entrance to Passage Cave following that rocky path to the left."

After thanking the Ranger, the group of five followed the directions he had gave them. They could see how vegetation slowly disappeared, being replaced but nothing but dull brown rocks. Every minute or two a quake shook the land, causing a few pebbles to roll down the mountain.

"Here it says that Passage Cave used to be the only way to reach Nowtoch City," Serena explained, reading from her tablet. "But they

opened a new path across the mountain in order to have a safer way to reach the city."

"So much for that safer way," Natalie said. "Oh well, let's take this as a challenge. I won't have any business in a Gym if some cave dwelling Pokemon are enough to scare me."

"That's the spirit!" Ash said.

It didn't take them long to reach the entrance of a large cave. Guarding the cave was another Ranger, this time a redheaded woman, accompanied by a Folerog, and looking extremely bored. The Ranger was sitting on a large metallic box that had the symbol of the Tandor Ranger Union painted on its sides. The moment she noticed the group approaching, she was snapped of her boredom and stood to attention.

"Whoa there! Hey, are you planning to enter Passage Cave?" the Ranger asked.

"One of your friends told us the usual route is blocked, so yeah, we are going to cross this cave in order to reach Nowtoch City," Ash explained.

"Is there any problems?" Serena asked.

"No. You aren't the only ones crossing the cave now that Owten Nook is blocked. Before you cross, however, you need to have this," the Ranger said, before opening the box and handing the group five gas masks.

"Gas masks?" Clemont asked. "Does this cave have leaking gas deposits or something?"

"Do you know what's a Tonemy, blondie?" the Ranger asked.

"It's a Poison-type Pokemon only found in Tandor," it was Natalie who answered. "They mostly live in caves, and their main method of

attack is to release venomous gas."

The ranger nodded in approval. "Somebody did her homework."

"Excuse them. They aren't from here," Natalie said.

Ash and Serena introduced Tonemy's name in their Pokedex. The screen displayed a rather adorable looking pokemon with a small, purple round body, black beady eyes, a small mouth, stubby legs, bat-like wings, a tuft of brown hair on its head, and a furry tail of the same color.

" Tonemy, the Poison Ball Pokemon. Poison. New trainers traveling through caves are advised to bring along antidotes against a Tonemy's poison, which causes great pain if it isn't treated immediately."

"Yikes," Bonnie winced, as she held Dedenne close to her. "I better keep Dedenne safe from those Pokemon."

"Heh, if only the Tonemy were the problem," the Ranger continued. "Tonemy are a bunch of annoying pests, but they ain't the worst of the bunch. There are other species that live on that cave as well. One of them is Barewl. Since they're part Steel type, they don't give a damn about the Tonemy's gassing the caves."

Once again, Ash and Serena introduced the name of the new Pokemon in their Pokedex. This time, the screen displayed a small, round shaped brown Pokemon with stubby legs, a tail, no arms, and a helmet covering its head with a wire sticking out of it. Its face was just a pair of small black eyes, with no mouth or nose.

" Barewl, the Iron Ball Pokemon. Steel/Rock. Incredibly dense metals make up their bodies. They are much heavier than they look. They live in dark caves and feed on rocks and metal ore."

"Well, they don't look that bad. At least we won't have to worry about looking tasty to them," Serena said.

"When the Barewl clash with the Tonemy, they naturally win and drive the purple buggers away. But this causes other species, the Grozard, to show up. Grozard are Ground-types, so the Steel and Rock-type Barewl are easy pickings for them," the Ranger continued.

As expected, Ash and Serena introduced Grozard's name to find information of them. Grozard was a small, orange snake-like Pokemon with small ears, and rocks growing down its back. In the image, it appeared half buried, like a Diglett.

" Grozard, the Seprent Pokemon. Ground. Its snakelike body is almost always partially underground. The tunnels they dig make traveling caves hazardous."

"And when the Barewl are driven away, the Tonemy return. And since Tonemy can fly, they don't have to worry about Grozard's Ground-type attacks. And when the Grozards flee, the Barewl return. Lather, rinse, repeat," the Ranger explained.

"So the three species of Pokemon are engaged in a three way war that neither side can win," Clemont summarized.

"Exactly. But don't think that they'll ignore you to focus on their usual enemies. These Pokemon are very territorial this time of the year, so they'll attack whoever they perceive as an intruder," the Ranger explained. "My advice? Try to cross that cave as quickly as you can, and try not to draw attention to yourselves."

"So, are those all the Pokemon we should worry about?" Clemont asked.

"I think there are a few Dunsparce living there, but there aren't that many and they won't give you any trouble," the Ranger replied.

"If that's all, let's go in," Ash decided. "Thank you for the masks and the advice."

"Don't sweat it. You can thank me by being extra careful while you're inside that cave," the Ranger said, as she moved away in order to let the group pass.

They cautiously entered the cave, as another tremor shook it. Shadows began to grow darker as they walked into the cave and moved away from the entrance. Fortunately, Clemont had a solution.

"Don't worry guys, I've got this! Clemontic Gear on!" Clemont said, as a mechanical arm emerged from the backback. Said arm ended in a satellite dish that resembled the frills of a Helioptile. With a click, the gadget turned on, projecting a powerful beam of yellow light, illuminating the area.

"Nice one, Clemont. Though I think I can help too," Serena said, as she picked a pokeball. "Braixen, come out and give us some light!"

"You too, Raptorch!" Natalie added.

The two Fire-type Pokemon emerged from the capture devices. Braixen immediately ignited her wand, and alongside Raptorch's ignited tailtip, they provided even more light.

"The light may attract the native Pokemon, but we can't hope to cross the cave quickly if we can't see where we're going," Clemont reasoned.

No one objected to that, and they continued forward, their guards up if they come across a group of hostile Pokemon. They eventually reached a split in the path, branching off in multiple directions.

"Where to?" Ash asked.

"According to this map, in order to reach the exit we should always move to the north. The other tunnels lead to the lair of the native Pokemon," Serena explained, as she read the information from her tablet.

"Well, that solves-" Ash said, but was interrupted by another tremor.

"Guys? Did you feel that?" Bonnie asked.

"Nene!" Dedenne cried, and buried himself inside Bonnie's bag.

"I'm still feeling it right now," Natalie said. "And it's getting stronger!"

"Look!" Clemont said, pointing the light towards one of the branching tunnels.

While at first it didn't appear to be anything, all of them saw multiple bumps on the surface that moved towards them. The closer they come, the more intense the tremors became.

"What's that!?" Bonnie shouted.

"Underground Pokemon!" Ash said in realization. "Come on, move!"

They didn't need to be told twice, and they quickly moved out of the way, returning to the tunnel they came from, just as the underground horde crossed the tunnel, leaving a trail of uneven terrain in its wake.

"They must be Grozard. The Pokedex said they liked to dig and move underground," Ash said.

"They appeared to be in a hurry. As if they were trying to run away from something," Clemont said, rubbing his chin.

"Running away from what?" Bonnie asked.

Natalie's eyes grew wide as she pointed in the direction the Grozard came from. "Perhaps from that!"

Everybody looked in the same direction, and much to their horror, they saw a cloud of purple gas quickly filling the tunnel, moving towards them. Nobody needed to tell that that if they breathed that gas, it wouldn't do them any good.

"A poisonous cloud! It must be a job of the Tonemy!" Serena said.

"The gas masks, now!" Ash commanded once again, as he took his mask and put it on his face, the rest of his companions doing the same.

"Ash! What about Dedenne and Pikachu? We don't have gas masks for them!" Bonnie pointed out.

Of course they didn't. The Ranger probably assumed that they would just return their Pokemon to their pokeballs, but there wasn't a situation that convinced Pikachu to do so, and Clemont had left Dedenne's pokeball back at the Prism Tower. And of course, there were also Braixen and Raptorch, whom they were needed outside to provide light.

"In that case, we'll have to push that cloud back! Birbie, I choose you!" Ash said, tossing a pokeball, which released his first Tandor capture. "Birbie, use Gust to push that cloud of gas back!"

"Bir-Birbie!" Birbie chirped, as he took off, and began to flap his wings as fast as he could producing a powerful gust of wind that successfully pushed the cloud backwards.

"Good job, Birbie! Now everyone, to the next tunnel!" Ash said, as every other human and Pokemon quickly followed his lead.

The tunnel lead into an ample cavern with a small river crossing through it. There were many other tunnels that led to other parts of the cave, but according to Serena, they had to take the northernmost one. Which they would have done, if the cavern wasn't the place of yet another battle, as a bunch of Barewl were pelting some Tonemy with Rock-type attacks. The Tonemy tried to defend themselves, but their Poison and Normal type attacks did little to the small but tough Rock and Steel-type Pokemon, and in no time, the Tonemy flew away.

And then, the Barewl turned around, and glared at the group of humans.

"We're only passing through. Just ignore us, okay?" Natalie asked, trying to sound as nonthreatening as possible.

"REWL!" one of the Barewls yelled, and the rest of the Barewl, numbering in about a dozen, attacked. Half of them charged forward, while the rest attacked from a distance using Rock-type moves, forcing everybody to move away in a different directions, while the charging Barewl split as well.

"Raptorch, Flame Wheel!" Natalie ordered.

"Rap rap!" Raptorch yipped, as its body spun into a ball that was quickly coated in flames, crashing against a trio of Barewl. The attack packed so much force, it send the Rock and Steel-type Pokemon crashing against their brethen behind them.

"Ash, remember how did we defeat that Folerog?" Serena asked.

As the memory dawned upon him, as nodded and smirked knowingly. "Birbie, Gust on those Barewl!"

"What? But a Flying-type attack will do very little against those Pokemon!" Natalie protested.

Both Ash and Birbie ignored her, and the Eden Bird Pokemon once again flapped his wings as hard as he could, creating a tornado localized around the Barewl closest to them. Their double resistance meant that they weren't really perturbed by the move, but that was only the first part of something much worse that was to come.

"Braixen, Flamethrower into the tornado!" Serena ordered.

"Braix!" Braixen cried, as she pointed her wand towards the Gust, releasing a stream of flames.

The Flamethrower combined with the Gust, turning into a blazing tornado. The Barewls inside cried in pain, and jumped out of it before they were cooked alive. While their bodies were covered in burn marks, they had still enough energy to run away.

"Ba! Barewl!" one of the Barewl in the back, who appeared to be the leader, screeched as it jumped up and down. The rest of Barewl summoned more Rock-type attacks to bombard the humans and their Pokemon with.

"Pikachu, deflect those rocks with Iron Tail!" Ash ordered.

"Pancham, do the same with Arm Thrust!" Serena ordered as well, while tossing Pancham's Pokeball forward, releasing the Playful Pokemon.

Pikachu's tail glowed with a metallic sheen, as Pancham's arm turned bright white, and the two Pokemon leaped towards the assault of incoming rocks and boulders, shattering them to bits with well timed strikes..

"Wow..." Natalie said in awe.

The Barewls, upon seeing their attack nullified, decided that these foes were too much for them and quickly ran away. Well, except the leader, who protested loudly, and probably called them cowards, before running away as well, seeing that it was vastly outnumbered and outgunned.

"We did it! We made them run away!" Bonnie cheered.

"Nenene!" Dedenne cheered as well.

"Pikapi!" Pikachu, however cried in warning.

"Pikachu is right, this isn't over yet!" Ash said, as he moved from the entrance of the tunnel they just left, as a cloud of poison gas poured into the larger cavern.

And from the cloud of gas, a multitude of Tonemy emerged, letting out high pitched screeches. Some of the Tonemy took a deep breath and exhaled even more poisonous gas, while others used attacks such as Sludge and Shadow Ball.

"Birbie, Gust against that cloud of gas!" Ash ordered. "Pikachu, Thunderbolt!"

"Braixen, Flamethrower! Pancham, Dark Pulse!" Serena called.

"Raptorch, Ember!"

"Luxray, come out and use Discharge!" Clemont said, tossing the pokeball containing his strongest Pokemon.

Birbie once again created a tornado to push the cloud of poisonous gas back, while the Tonemy found themselves at the receiving end of a storm of yellow lightning bolts, a wall of flames, and a stream of pure darkness, forcing them to fly back to where they come from.

And for the first time since the group entered Passage Cave, silence reigned. But aid reign didn't last long, being broken by Natalie groaning loudly.

"Just what's wrong with this cave!? This place's a goddamn warzone!" she complained, not caring that her voice might attract more Pokemon. "If I wasn't with you guys..."

"How long until the exit, Serena?" Clemont asked.

The honey blonde opened her tablet, and checked the map. "We need to take that tunnel, which will take us to another chamber, and on said chamber there's the exit."

"So we aren't that far away from the exit. Good," Natalie said, relieved.

"We can't leave just yet," Ash said, much to everybody else's shock.

"Pika?" Pikachu asked.

"Ash, have you lost your mind? Why do you want to spend more time on this cave with three warring Pokemon groups?" Bonnie asked, frustrated at her friend's decision.

"Natalie is right. We're a large group, but what about trainers who travel alone? Especially inexperienced trainers. This cave is way too dangerous for them the way it is. We need to stop those Pokemon from constantly fighting. " Ash firmly stated.

"That's all nice and good, Ash, but how do you plan to do it?" Serena asked, crossing his mind. "I mean, don't get me wrong, I see where are you coming from, but what we saw is only a fraction of the Pokemon that live inside this cave. Our Pokemon are strong, but not strong enough to take on such big numbers."

"We may not need to," Ash said. "Pokemon that live in large groups like these ones usually have a leader. If we beat the leader, the rest of the group will fall apart."

"That's only partially true. Sooner or later, another Pokemon will take the place of the leader," Clemont countered.

"But by doing this, we'll be buying the Rangers more time to clear out the debris from Owten Nook," Ash rebutted. "Besides, wasn't the constant battles inside the cave what caused the avalanche to begin with?"

"That's... not really a bad plan," Serena said.

"If you put it that way..." Clemont said.

"I hate to admit it, but Ash has a point," Natalie reluctantly said. "I hate spending more time than I need to on this place, but given how lucky I was to meet you guys before I entered the cave... it would be really selfish of me not to help other trainers as well."

"Alright, in that case, it's settled! Time to teach those Pokemon a lesson until they calm down," Ash said.

"Pikapi!" Pikachu said in agreement.

"If we hope to do it, we need to take on the three groups of Pokemon simultaneously," Clemont interjected. "Otherwise it will be the same cycle they've been going through with an extra step."

"Very well then. I think Greninja could make short work of the Grovyle, so we'll take them," Ash said, as he released the Ninja Pokemon.

"Given that Natalie and I have Fire-type Pokemon, we should go against the Belduga," Serena offered.

"That leaves Bonnie and I with the Team Rocket," Clemont said.

"Take Pikachu and Birbie with you," Ash said, much to his two Pokemon's surprise, especially Birbie, something Ash noticed. "I will be fine with Greninja. Birbie can dispel the poisonous clouds with Gust, and Pikachu could give you some additional firepower. Don't worry guys, I simply think that as long as this situation lasts, you'd do better with Clemont."

"Pikapi," Pikachu said, patting Birbie as if telling him not to worry, before he scurried to Clemont's side. The little bird took a look at Ash before doing the same.

"In that case, take Chespin with you," Clemont said, releasing his Grass-type Kalosian starter. "Chespin will do much better against Ground-types than Poison-types."

Pikachu greeted Chespin, and presumably explained him what was going on. Chespin nodded, and quickly walked to Ash's side.

"Oh, and since none of your Pokemon can provide light, you'll need this," Clemont said, as he handed Ash a flashlight.

"Well thought," Ash said, switching the flashlight on. "Now, let's see where this Pokemon come from, and we'll find their main lairs, and hopefully, their leader. Once we're done, let's meet here again."

Everybody nodded, and the three groups entered a different tunnel each.

...

Ash, followed by Greninja and Clemont's Chespin, ran through the tunnel that would lead him towards the Grozard's territory, using Clemont's flashlight to illuminate the path ahead. The Pallet Town native noticed that the tunnel was becoming progressively wider and taller.

"Good, that way, we'll have more space to move during a battle," Ash said to himself.

Once again, the ground started to shake, forcing Ash, his Pokemon, and his borrowed Pokemon to stop. Several bumps of ground moving towards them. Once they were close enough, the bumps stopped, and the upper body of several Grozard burst from them. The closest Grozard's bodies started to glow with a faint orange light, as their bodies released shockwaves that caused the ground below their feet to shift and tremble.

"That's Bulldoze! Guys, move back!" Ash ordered, the two Kalosian starters doing the same.

Meanwhile, the Grozard in the back bombarded them with mostly Rock-type attacks, and oddly, a couple Shadow Balls. Ash, however, knew that he couldn't let them set the pace of the battle.

"Greninja, Double Team!" Ash ordered.

"Gre!" Greninja replied, as suddenly, dozen of Greninja copies appeared around the tunnel, much to the Grozard's confusion, as they quickly moved to attack them.

"Good, now that they're distracted, Greninja, Water Shuriken! Chespin, Vine Whip!" Ash commanded.

"Gre-NINJA!"

"Ches!"

Greninja fired a barrage of watery ninja stars, summoning one as soon as another left his webbed hands, while Chespin lashed at the Grozard. Greninja wasn't attacking with whips that grew from under his neck.

"Gro! Grooooo!" the Grozard cried, as they were pelted by the barrage of super effective attacks, causing most of them to flee.

"Yes! We pushed them back! Good job guys!" Ash greeted the two Pokemon. "However, this isn't over yet, not by a long shot! We need to find the leader!"

Both Greninja and Chespin nodded, and followed Ash through the tunnel. They would encounter a few more Grozard here and there that would attempt to stop their incursion into their home, but they were easily defeated. First by Greninja's Night Slash, another group by Chespin's Pin Missile, then another by Greninja's Aerial Ace.

Ash knew that the key to victory was not to let the enemy not even a moment to breathe. And thus strategy paid off when the human and two Pokemon reached a large cavern that the Pallet Town teen reasoned it was the Grozard's main dwelling. There were several Grozard that were looking at Ash with defiant eyes.

"Sorry Grozard, I didn't want to do this, but you left us with no other option!" Ash replied, sensing the hostility the wild Pokemon were projecting onto him, while his auburn eyes tried to guess which one was the leader.

Then, the ground started to shake, much more violently than it did before. However, Ash could tell that this wasn't a Ground-type attack

caused by the Grozard. As the Grozard present quickly dug underground to flee, Greninja and Chespin tensed up, as if sensing that a great danger was about to come.

"TER!"

That moment, a new Pokemon burst from underground. Like Grozard, it was an orange serpent, only much, much larger, whose body split into two necks with a horned head each. Both heads pierced Ash and his Pokemon with a fierce glare.

"Whoa! Just... what is that!?" Ash asked, quickly scanning it with his Pokedex.

" Terlard, the Double Worm Pokemon, and Grozard's evolved form. Ground/Dragon. Their two heads have completely independent brains. That they ever manage to coordinate at all is a miracle." The Pokedex droned.

"So you're a Terlard. An evolution. I imagine that you must be the leader of this bunch, right?" Ash asked, not really expecting for the two headed Pokemon to confirm his suspicions. "I don't know what's gotten into you and your pack, but this senseless violence needs to stop!"

One of the heads lunged towards Ash, jaws wide open, ready to crush him between them. The Kantonian trainer's reflexes kicked in, making him jump backwards, just before Greninja got between them and swatted the offending head with powerful slap.

"Whoa!"

"GRE!" Greninja yelled, piercing Terlard with an angry glare.

"So, a fight it is. I'm sorry to do this, but you and your friends are making this cave and its surroundings much more dangerous than they need to be, and you need to calm down! Greninja, Water Shuriken! Chespin, Vine Whip!"

Once again, Greninja formed two watery shuriken between his fingers, before tossing them at Terlard, while Chespin lashed out with a pair of whips that emerged from his neck. Terlard's heads opened their jaws, releasing a wall of purple, blue and magenta flames, blocking the attacks.

"Watch out! That was a Dragon Pulse!" Ash noted. "This Terlard is much stronger than the Grozard we had faced!"

Terlard's tail, which was also split in two, with a jagged spade at the end of each tip, burst from underground behind Greninja, and smacked him in the back, making him fall on the ground facefirst.

"Greninja!" Ash cried.

Terlard tried to capitalize on its advantage by breathing yet another Dragon Pulse at him, but was stopped by Chespin wrapping his whips around each of his necks without Ash having to order him, pulling Terlard back.

"Well done, Chespin!" Ash praised the Grass-type.

"Ches ches!" the Spiny Nut Pokemon happily replied, before Terlard reared its heads back, violently pulling the much smaller Pokemon. "PIIIIIIN!"

"Greninja, grab Chespin!" Ash commanded. "Chespin, release your Vine Whip!"

"Ninja!" Greninja cried, as he leaped towards Chespin just as Clemont's Pokemon let go of Terlard, and was grabbed by Greninja's arm.

"Well done!" Ash said. "Now, use Double Team!"

After seeing Chespin on the ground, Greninja filled the cavern with duplicates. Both heads looked around in confusion, before angrily snarling. Their shared body began to glow, as they shockwaves

through the ground that caused the whole place to violently shake, causing small rocks to drop from the ceiling, and quickly dispelling the illusions.

"Whoa! That was an Earthquake!" Ash said, trying to keep his balance. "Be careful! This Terlard seems to be on a different league than the other Pokemon of this cave!"

Having only two enemies to worry about, Terlard continued to bombard them with Dragon Pulses, with one head aiming for Greninja, and the other head aiming for Chespin, forcing them onto the defensive.

Ash wracked his brain thinking how to defeat this opponent. If everything else failed he had Battle Bond, but he didn't want to rely on that for a mere wild Pokemon. But Double Team had proved to be useless, and Chespin could only help so much and-

Ash smirked as an idea dawned upon him. "Chespin, when Terlard fires again, use Vine Whip again! But this time, tie both necks together!"

"Ches?" Chespin asked, unsure, remembering what happened the last time he tried that.

"Just trust me on this! Everything will be fine!" Ash promised.

"Ches..." Chespin unsurely said, as Terlard's mouth billowed with purple flames.

The Spiny Nut Pokemon jumped once again to dodge Terlard's Dragon Pulse, before using Vine Whip once again, tying both necks together.

"Quickly Greninja, use Night Slash before Chespin is pulled away!" Ash shouted.

"Gre!"

Greninja leaped towards Terlard as he summoned a dark energy blade with purple edges, slashing the Double Worm Pokemon's two faces. One head tried to pull back, but the other tried to get rid of Chespin's bindings, meaning that they got nothing done.

"Laaaaaaard... !" Terlard cried in pain as just like the Grozard before, dug underground in order to flee the two Kalosian Pokemon's onslaughts, forcing Chespin to release it.

After Terlard fled, silence reigned supreme, as Ash and the two Pokemon tensed up, almost sensing that Terlard was going to come back with a vengeance. But said moment never came.

"It seems that guy had enough," Ash said, deciding he could lower his guard and relax for the time being. "Come on, let's see if we can help the others."

...

Meanwhile, Serena and Natalie rushed through another tunnel, one that lead into the Barewl's territory. The army of Iron Sphere Pokemon tried to bombard them with Rock-type attacks, but Pancham took care of them while Braixen and Raptorch roasted them with powerful Fire-type attacks.

Braixen would shower them in flames with Flamethrower, forcing them to disperse besides harming them. Raptorch would then pick them one by one with Flame Wheel, Ember or Mud Slap. And whenever they counterattacked, usually with Rock-type moves, Pancham would spring into action, shatter the rocks with a well placed Arm Thurst, or pushing them back with Dark Pulse.

Eventually, the girls reached a large cavern teeming with Barewl, with the Barewl leader in the middle, angrily barking orders, frustrated at how its troops were unable to keep their domain safe from invaders.

"Natalie, watch out, Raptorch is about to get flanked!" Serena warned the brown haired girl.

And indeed, while Raptorch was using Fire Fang on a Barewl, another was coming at him from one of his sides.

"Raptorch, slam the Barewl you're holding against the one coming from your left!" Natalie commanded.

The Fire Dino Pokemon did so, neutralizing two enemy Pokemon with a single move.

"Rewl, rewl!" the Barewl leader screeched.

The other Barewl nodded, and started to use their Rock-type attacks as well. Not on the girls and their Pokemon, but to build a small hill of piled rocks.

"What... what are they doing?" Natalie asked.

Once the two hills were big enough, the Barewl started to climb it from the far side, and slide it the front side like a sledge while rolling, launching themselves at the intruders at high speed. Some of them missed, slamming violently against the walls of the cavern, making it shake, but others were really close to their marks.

"Quickly, fall back! To the tunnel!" Serena urged.

Natalie nodded, as she and the Pokemon followed Serena into the relative safety of the narrow tunnel.

"What... what the hell are they doing?" Natalie asked, panting heavily.

"They're using Rollout. The small mounds of rocks is to help them build up speed so Rollout is even stronger," Serena explained, having realized what was their plan. "The moment we enter their lair, more Barewl will come barreling at us at great speed. I doubt our Pokemon can take more than one hit that carries so much force."

"For a bunch of walking rockheads, that's a pretty clever tactic," Natalie said, sounding annoyed, but still holding some hint of admiration for their tactics. "Maybe we should wait for them to come to us, but it doesn't seem like they plan to leave their lair."

"So we are at a stalemate," Serena sighed.

"These Pokemon are quite tough. Your boyfriend must be having a hard time, given that he's all alone and with only two Pokemon," Natalie said.

"Um, about that..." Serena began, her cheeks turning pink. "Ash is not my boyfriend. We're traveling together, but that's it."

Natalie raised an eyebrow. "He isn't? You would have fooled me. Given the way you act around him and..." Natalie trailed off, a wide smile spreading across her face as a realization dawned upon her. "Sweet Twin Gods! You *do* like him, don't you?"

"Can we talk about my love life later? We have a bunch of Pokemon to subdue," Serena chastised the younger girl.

"Right, right, sorry," the brown haired girl said. She peeked through the tunnel exit, just enough not to be seen. The Barewl were still there, with the leader in the middle and two of them on the top of the rock mounds, ready to Rollout them to death the moment they entered the place. "Hmmm... it seems they're still waiting for us to make our move."

Serena also took a peek at the army of small Pokemon that waited for her. "If we could only take down the leader, the others wouldn't be a threat."

"The problem is, they vastly outnumber us, and the moment we step into their dwelling, our Pokemon are going to get steamrolled," Natalie said. "If there was a way to distract them, or stun them or something... it doesn't need to be long term, just long enough for us to get to the leader."

The gears inside Serena's brain began to turn, as she realized she had a Pokemon that could be of help. Her hand reached one of her two unopened pokeballs. "Perhaps we can disable them for a little while. Selkid, come out!"

"Sel!" the Sea Nymph Pokemon said upon being released.

"Whoa!" Natalie gasped upon seeing the Water and Fairy type. She crouched down to inspect her, causing Selkid to wimper and hide behind Serena's leg, not that the Moki Town girl was deterred by such reaction. "You have a *Selkid* ? You just arrived at Tandor, and got your hands on a Selkid? How? Where? We aren't even close to the sea!"

"It's... a long story," Serena said. "Anyway, what's important now is that Selkid can be of a lot of help. Selkid, I need you to use Sing to put the Pokemon inside that cavern to sleep. But be sure not to get too close to the tunnel exit."

"S-Sel!" Selkid replied affirmatively, leaving the relative safety of Serena's leg, and walking towards the edge of the tunnel entrance.

"Everyone, cover your ears," Serena told both Natalie and their Pokemon, which did as instructed.

Selkid began to intone a soft, melodious song, as ethereal musical notes started to appear around the cavern, slowly floating around the place. The Barewl inside started to get drowsy, some of them dropping on their faces and snoring.

"It works!" Natalie cheered.

"Yes, it does! No time to waste! Get to the leader, my Pokemon will cover you!" Serena urged. "Briaxen, create an opening with Flamethrower!"

"Yes! Come on Raptorch!" Natalie said, as she and her started rushed into the cave.

Selkid's Sing hasn't been able to put all the Barewl to sleep. Many of them were only groggy and forcing themselves to wake up, with some not even drowsy at all. Still, Braixen's Falmethrower was enough to force most of the awake Barewl into the defensive. When they tried to attack Natalie and Raptorch, their Rock-type attacks were stopped by an Arm Thrust and a Water Pulse.

Natalie finally reached the leader, angrily barking orders at its minions, trying to wake them up.

"Raptorch, Flame Wheel!" Natalie ordered.

"Torch!" Raptorch yipped, as he curled into a spinning ball, before his body was coated in flames, and smashed against the distracted Barewl.

"Bar!" Barewl yelled, looking angrily at Raptorch. Several rocks appeared above the Fire Dino Pokemon, before they fell down on it.

"Quickly, dodge!" Natalie said, as her Pokemon nimbly moved, avoiding the falling boulders. "Now, Mud Slap!"

Raptorch swepted the ground with its tail, sending a wave of mud at the Barewl leader, covering it in grime, and leaving its vision impaired. It began to cry in pain and indignation as its tail glowed with a metallic sheen, and swung it aimlessly.

"Now, Fire Fang!" Natalie ordered.

Raptorch's mouth was filled with flames, as it trapped the Barewl leader between its blazing jaws, before slamming it on the ground. Natalie grabbed her last empty pokeball.

"Pokeball go-" Natalie was about to toss the pokeball, but stopped herself before the ball could leave her hand. "You know what? I'm not risking it again."

And Natalie ran towards the Barewl and poked it with her pokeball still in her hand, only allowing herself to drop it the moment Barewl was turned into pure energy and absorbed into the capture device. The pokeball shook a couple times before it dinged, confirming the successful capture. Natalie picked up the pokeball and raised it like a trophy.

"Yes, I captured a Barewl! My first capture!" she cheered. "About damn time! Remind me to thank Bonnie when I see her again."

The few awake Barewl, upon seeing their mighty leader defeated, cried in horror and ran away from the cavern. Serena, followed by her Pokemon, walked towards Natalie as she looked around the area. She nodded in satisfaction.

"I think these Barewl won't cause anymore trouble, at least for the time being," Serena said. "We're done here. Come on, let's see if the others need our help."

...

On another part of the cave, Clemont and Bonnie battled the area where all the Tonemy lived. The purple winged Pokemon attempted to drown them with toxic gas, but whenever they attempted such a tactic...

"Birbie, Gust!" Bonnie commanded. Bonnie was the one commanding Ash's Pokemon, so Clemont could focus on his own Pokemon.

"BIIIIIRB!" Birbie chirped, as he flapped his wings as fast as he could, producing a wind current, pushing the gas backwards, much to the Tonemy's confusion.

"Pikachu, Thunderbolt!" Bonnie added.

"Luxray, Swift!" Clemont ordered. "Bunnelby, Wild Charge!"

Unlike the Grozard and the Barewl, who used direct attacks, it seemed that the Tonemy's tactic was exclusively to flood the tunnels with Poison Gas, and once somebody countered that tactic, they didn't know what to do.

Some of them attempted something different, like using Gunk Shot or getting close and smack them with Steel Wing. But their attacks proved to be ineffective, with the rangers falling victim to Pikachu's Electro Ball and Birbie's Air Cutter, and those who dared to come close felt the power of Luxray's Thunder Fang and Bunnelby's Double Slap.

Needless to say, it didn't take long for the Tonemy to fly away, letting out scared screeches.

"You're doing great! Keep pressing forward, and we'll get to their lair!" Clemont said, as he and his Pokemon advanced, with Bonnie and Ash's Pokemon covering their rear. "Hopefully we'll find the leader there."

"How will we know who's the leader?" Bonnie asked. "They all look the same to me."

"Pack leaders usually have this imposing presence to them that show everybody that they're in charge," Clemont said. "Once we see it, we'll know."

"If you say so," Bonnie said.

They followed the tunnel until they reached to a large stone chamber that had a couple of tunnel exits to the sides. Dozens upon dozens of Tonemy flew around the place, and the moment they saw the intruders, half of them dived at the newcomers, while the other half released clouds of toxic gas.

The tactic didn't have any more success than the previous times they attempted it. Birbie once again pushed the noxious clouds back with Gust, while Pikachu fired Electroballs and Thunderbolts. Luxray

fired barrages of golden stars that homed onto the Tonemy, while Bunnelby slapped the Tonemy that got close.

Desperation spread among the Tonemy, given that neither their numbers or abilities were making any dent on the invaders, with a good chunk of them flying away.

"Yes! They're running away!" Bonnie cheered. "Do you think we got the leader?"

"Probably," Clemont said. "One of our attacks must have knocked it out, so once they saw-"

Clemont, however, was interrupted when one of the few remaining Tonemy, strangely enough, landed on the ground -the first time they saw a Tonemy touch the floor-, and much to his and Bonnie's shock, after a crackling sound, began to glow with a white light, and started to grow larger.

"It is... evolving?" Bonnie fearfully asked.

"I think we just found the leader," Clemont said, his eyes fixed on the evolving Pokemon.

When the light disappeared, Clemont and Bonnie could take a better look at the new Pokemon. It was much, *much* larger than a Tonemy, with a robust body supported by four thick legs, a huge mouth full of sharp teeth, large nostrils, and a ridge of light brown fur running down its back, ending in a furry tail. Tonemy's vestigial wings were at the sides of its head, looking like ears, but it was obvious that this Pokemon was not capable of flight.

"TOFURANG!" the newly evolved Pokemon roared.

"Tofurang? That's its name?" Bonnie asked.

Many of the Tonemy that had left returned to the chamber, flocking around their new and powerful leader. Clemont gulped, but reigned

in his doubts and fear.

"Alright, my Pokemon and I will deal with this new threat. Bonnie, use Ash's Pokemon to cover our backs," Clemont told his sister.

"Leave them to me!" Bonnie replied.

The Tonemy charged again, several towards Bonnie and Ash's Pokemon, and others towards Clemont and his Pokemon. Bonnie did a good job keeping them out of his back, even if she missed some of them. Fortunately, Bunnelby was there to swat away the rest with powerful Double Slap.

"Luxray, Wild Charge on that Tofurang!" Clemont ordered.

"Ray!" Luxray's body began to crackle with electricity, before rocketing towards the purple skinned behemoth.

In response, Tofurang's body glowed with an orange aura, and charged forward, leaving a trail of cracked ground in its wake. The two Pokemon met in the middle, the energy of both attacks exploding into a blast of kinetic energy that blew a gust of wind and sent both Pokemon skidding backwards.

"Luxray, are you okay?" Clemont asked, worried.

"Lux... !" Luxray said with a nod, before his eyes focused again on the enemy.

"That was Giga-Impact," Clemont noticed. "That Pokemon got a huge power boost upon evolving."

Tofurang took a deep breath, before opening its mouth, releasing a wall of purple sludge at Clemont's pokemon. The Lumiose Gym Leader immediately identified the attack.

"And that's Sludge Wave! Bunnelby, quickly counter it with Mud Shot!" Clemont ordered.

"Bun!" Bunnelby created a golden energy sphere between his ears, and launched it at the incoming wave of detritus. The golden sphere burst into mud, stopping Tofurang's attack.

"Bunnelby, watch out!" Bonnie called.

Too late. A pair of Tonemy flew towards Bunnelby and smacked him with a Steel Wing each when he was mid air, sending him crashing down against the rock floor.

"BUUUUN!"

"Bunnelby!" Clemont cried.

Before the Tonemy could attack the downed Bunnelby, Luxray moved to intercept, shielding Bunnelby with his body, while frying the nearby Tonemy with a potent Discharge.

"Well done, Luxray!" Clemont said. "But don't lower your guard! Tofurang is coming after you!"

Because, indeed, Tofurang was charging at Luxray with its mouth wide open, its sharp teeth glowing with a purple light, which made Clemont realize it was going to use Poison Fang on the Gleam Eyes Pokemon. Fortunately, Clemont knew what to do.

"Bunnelby, quickly, Dig!" he ordered.

Bunnelby jumped into the air, and began to rapidly spin, drilling into the ground with his whole body.

"Luxray, dodge the attack!" Clemont told his Electric-type Pokemon.

Luxray managed to jump out of the way just as Tofurang's venomous jaws closed upon him. The purple Pokemon tried to bite Luxray multiple times, but the Gleam Eyes Pokemon used his superior speed to dodge every time and run circles around it.

Then, the ground below Tofurang cracked, and Bunnelby burst from underground, slamming into Tofurang.

"Luxray, now! Thunder Fang!" Clemont commanded.

"Lux-RAY!" Luxray cried, as electricity poured out of his mouth, before he sank his teeth onto the larger Pokemon.

Tofurang cried in pain as electricity ran through his body.

"And Bunnelby, Wild Charge!"

Bunnelby's body crackled with yellow electricity as he launched himself towards Tofurang, slamming into its body, and zapping it once again for good measure.

"To... fu..." Tofurang panted, as it stumbled backwards, its body covered in smoking burn marks, before it turned around, and escaped through one of the exit tunnels.

Seeing their leader defeated, the Tonemy swarm panicked and flew away in every direction, trying to escape the mighty invaders that had invaded their home. Clemont let out a sigh of both relief and tiredness.

"Finally..." Clemont said.

"Yes! Victory!" Bonnie cheered, pumping his fist into the air. "Great work, guys!"

"Nenene!" Dedenne cheered as well.

...

A few minutes later, the group of five reunited once again in the same chamber they had split before, returned their borrowed Pokemon to their rightful trainer, and told the others about what they had fought before. Clemont and Bonnie told them about how a

Tonemy had spontaneously evolved into a Tofurang, and the other three quickly introduced the name into their Pokedex.

"Tofurang, the Cave Beast Pokemon, and Tonemy's evolved form. Poison. Unable to fly or move swiftly like Tonemy, Tofurang instead catch their prey by exhaling a poison gas that makes Pokémon sluggish." The Pokedex explained.

"It seems we all had our share of tough enemies," Natalie commented.

"But we persevered, and came out on top!" Ash added.

"Exactly," Clemont said with a nod.

"And what's most important: this cave will be now much safer to cross now that those Pokemon won't cause anymore trouble," Serena said. "At the very least, until the Rangers can clear out Owten Nook."

"Indeed. And speaking of which, shall we continue forward? I think I had enough of this cave," Clemont suggested.

Clemont was far from the only one who wanted to leave Passage Cave behind. Following the map, the group continued traveling north, this time without any hostile Pokemon attempting to attack them, until they finally reached the exit. The light of the sun and the blue skies were a welcomed sight after spending so much time inside that dark cave.

At the exit of the cave was another Ranger, next to another box identical to the one at the entrance. They handed them the gas masks and thanked them for their service. The Ranger told them that all they needed to do was continue forward and they'd reach Nowtoch City.

"Look! I can see a city into the distance!" Bonnie said, pointing forward. "Is that Nowtoch City?"

"If what the Ranger told us is true, then it has to be!" Ash said, the thought of his first Tandor Gym Battle filling him with excitement. Without any warning, he started running towards the city "Come on guys, let's go!"

The rest of the group quickly rushed after Ash -though Clemont protested about having to run without any need- as they headed towards Ash and Natalie's first major milestone in their journey.

Author's Note: Plenty of things happened on this chapter. Our heroes have met Natalie for the first time since they left Mokie Town, they crossed Passage Cave, and Natalie had captured her first Pokemon!

Sorry Serena, no Owten for you. Don't worry, there will be other Pokemon waiting for you to catch them in the future.

Given that Vitor got some time in the spotlight a couple chapters ago, it was only fair for his twin sister to get an appearance, don't you think? Also, Natalie failing to catch any Pokemon was based on my own very brief experience playing Pokemon Go, since I was constantly fudging ball throws and didn't catch anything besides the starter until I decided to delete the app.

In the game, Passage Cave is a rather uneventful cave, as expected from the game's very first dungeon, being made up by two short instances, only a couple trainers to stop you, and low level wild Pokemon. But of course that wasn't going to fly here, so I made it a little more dangerous and exciting.

Next chapter, the group finally arrives at Nowtoch City, where Ash will face his first Tandorian Gym Leader! In the meantime, don't forget to leave a review telling how much you liked this chapter (or how much you disliked it).

The Class is in Session

Chapter 7:

The Class is in Session

Nowtoch City

Just like the Ranger had said, it didn't take long for the group to arrive at Nowtoch City. As per usual, a sign greeted the group:

Welcome to Nowtoch City

The Bustling City in the Mountains!

After the small, rural towns of Moki and Kevlar, the group wasn't expecting to find themselves entering such a large city, in both extension as well as height, given that there were multiple skyscrapers that stuck out of the skyline. The city, however, wasn't all concrete, steel and glass, as there were numerous green areas, such as parks, as well as plenty of trees planted across the sidewalks, as well as around the edges of the city.

While Ash had wanted to go straight to the Gym as soon as they entered the city. However, Serena convinced her that doing so wouldn't be the best option right now, given that they had spent a lot of time inside a cave battling literal armies of wild Pokemon left and right.

"And you want your Pokemon to be at your best when you face your first Gym Leader, don't you?" Serena had asked.

And no matter how much Ash wanted to rebuke that question, he was unable to come up with any arguments, and conceded she had a point. So they headed straight towards the Pokemon Center in order to get their Pokemon restored to their best, and would take the afternoon to rest.

Natalie said she was going to a Pokemart in order to buy some more pokeballs, as well as other necessities, and Serena had suggested to go and do some general shopping. She was hoping that a large city like Nowtoch would have something more to offer in terms of shops than the small towns of Kevlar and Moki, something Natalie had agreed with. Bonnie also decided to tag along, leaving the boys alone in the Pokemon Center.

Ash didn't want to rest. Normally, he would train, but given that his Pokemon needed to rest, he couldn't do that either. So he was now sitting on the lobby of the Pokemon Center, doing the next best thing: find information about the Gym Leader he was about to face.

"So, how's the research going?" Clemont asked, coming with a pair of soda cans in his hands. He handed one to Ash, which he happily accepted.

"Did you know that the Nowtoch City Gym Leader, Maria, used to be Tandor's Champion?" Ash asked.

Clemont's eyes opened wide in shock. "No way! They weren't kidding when they said that Tandor's Gym Leaders were much tougher than average!"

"Yeah. Though being a Champion works a little different here than in other regions," Ash said, as his eyes looked at the screen of the Pokedex. "Rather than the League winner having to fight the Elite Four and then the reigning Champion, the League winner becomes Champion directly. Then, the reigning Champion must enter the League in order to defend their title. If the Champion declines to return, they automatically give up the title and becomes vacant until the next League winner.

"Maria won the League the last three years, but this year announced that she wasn't going to defend her title anymore, and decided to become a Gym Leader instead," Ash finished his explanation. "Her Gym also doubles as a trainer school, where she teaches young children how to become proper trainers. Huh, just like Roxanne."

"Don't you think that fighting a former Champion is a little too much for your first Gym Challenge?" Clemont asked, looking a little worried for his friend's chances. "Not to mention Natalie, who is a beginner. Even if Gym Leaders use weaker teams designated to fight beginners, it might still be too much for her."

"On the contrary, it gets me even more pumped! I mean, I can't hope to be a Pokemon Master if I only take the easiest road, don't you think?" Ash asked. "Besides, it's not that I'm a stranger to Champions. Diantha wasn't even the first Champion I battled against."

"Yes, but have you ever *defeated* a Champion before?" Clemont asked.

"I have faith that my Pokemon can push through any obstacle, no matter how big it is," Ash said, looking at Pikachu. "Right buddy?"

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu happily agreed.

"If you say so," Clemont replied, but didn't sound very convinced.

...

The next morning, the group of five headed towards Nowtoch Gym. Unlike the many skyscrapers, the Gym was a mere two story building, rather simple in design, with the symbol of the Pokemon League above the entrance that separated it from the rest of the buildings. As the automatic doors slid open, a soft chime announced to the people inside of the newcomers.

"Welcome to Nowtoch Gym!" the receptionist, a maroon haired woman in her forties, greeted the group, smiling. "Did you come to join Maria's trainer school, or do you plan to challenge her to a Gym Battle?"

"The latter," Ash added.

The receptionist then noticed the size of the group, and arched an eyebrow. "Are all of you going to challenge her?"

"No, just me and Natalie," Ash said, pointing at the younger girl.

"Very well then. Please follow that corridor to my left, and you'll find the battleground. Meanwhile, I'll inform Maria that she has challengers," the receptionist said, as she grabbed the phone. "She's usually teaching now, but she's willing to interrupt her classes to face challengers."

"Thank you," Ash said, as he and the rest of the group walked towards the corridor the receptionist had told them about.

After walking out of the corridor, the group reached the battleground, just like the receptionist had told them. The Nowtoch Gym battleground was a pretty standard field of dirt, without any frills, bells or whistles. Rather fitting for a Normal-type specialist as Maria.

A few seconds later, another door leading into the battleground opened, and a group of children lead by a pair of young women walked in. One of the women was carrying a pair of flags and a jacket with the Pokemon League symbol on its breast, meaning that she was a referee.

The other, whom everybody presumed was Maria, was a woman in her late twenties, with straight black hair that fell down her back, gray eyes, and fair skin. She was wearing a short sleeved white shirt, a pair of jeans, and maroon sneakers.

"Alright children, sit down, and don't make any noise, understood?" Maria told the children, who nodded and went to sit on the bleachers around the battleground, while Maria herself headed towards the group. "Heya! Welcome to my Gym! I'm Maria, the Gym Leader. So, I was told that I had a pair of challengers eager to battle me."

"That's correct! My name is Ash-"

"-Ketchum from Pallet Town," Maria said, much to the boy's surprise.

"You... you know who I am?" Ash asked.

"Yep. The latest Kalos League was pretty intense, and that was before all the stuff with Team Flare. I showed many of the matches in class, since you can learn quite a lot from them," Maria explained.

"And who is the other challenger...?"

"That would be me," Natalie said, raising her hand. "Name's Natalie Raine."

"Raine? Oh, I see, you're one of Kellyn's kids, are you?" Maria asked,

"Kellyn?" Ash repeated. "As in, Kellyn the Ranger?"

"Chief Ranger," Maria clarified. "You know him? Have you met him already?"

"I met him sometime ago in Sinnoh," Ash said. "So, he's now working on Tandor?"

"Sinnoh?" Natalie asked. "Oh, you must have met my older brother, Kellyn Jr."

"So, you have another brother besides Vitor?" Serena asked.

"Yep. He decided to follow dad's footsteps and become a Ranger. When he was old enough, he left Tandor in order to see the world and hone his skills," Natalie explained.

"Anyway, back on track," Maria interrupted, crossing her arms. "You two want to challenge me for a badge. So, who's going to go first?"

Ash looked at Natalie and smiled at her. "Ladies first?"

Natalie rubbed her arm and averted Ash's gaze. "Actually... how about you go first? That way, I'd get a better idea of what to expect of

a Gym battle. If you don't mind."

"Not at all. I hope you can learn a thing or two by watching me fight, then," Ash said.

"And she won't be the only one. My children are really excited to see one of the Kalos League finalists in action, live," Maria said, as she and Ash walked towards the battleground. "So, even if this is your first Gym Battle in Tandor, given that you're an experienced trainer, I'm going to use some of my strongest Pokemon. Is that okay?"

"Sure. I want you to do your worst," Ash confidently said.

"Well, well, somebody has a lot of faith in his chances," Maria laughed, as she and Ash took their respective places. "Did you know that you're about to face a former Champion?"

"I do. And that makes it even better," Ash replied.

The referee raised both her flags. "This is an official Gym Battle between the Gym Leader Maria, and Ash Ketchum. The battle will be single format with no time limit, and each trainer will use up to three Pokemon. The battle will be over when one side has no more Pokemon remaining. Only the challenger may make substitutions. Trainers, select your first Pokemon."

"Alright Pikachu, I choose you!" Ash said.

"Pika!" Pikachu happily replied, jumping from Ash's shoulder and landing on the ground on all fours, electric sparks jumping from his feet.

"So you start with your famous Pikachu. Well, I guess if you want to deal with a mouse, the best answer is a cat. Felunge, go!" Maria said, tossing a pokeball forward.

The pokeball opened, releasing a bipedal cat-like Pokemon, with white fur, the fur on one of its front paws being orange and the other

brown, and its feet of the opposite colors. It also had a brown patch of fur over one eye and an orange one over the other. It had two tails, one brown and the other orange. The Pokemon reminded Ash of Feleng, another cat-like Pokemon he had seen during Serena's first contest. He pulled out his Pokedex to scan it:

" Felunge, the Nimble Cat Pokemon, and Feleng's evolution. Normal. They're are expert hunters, able to see in very low light and move without a sound. Many people keep them to deter pests such as Chynimunk."

"Your Felunge looks strong. But you're going to need a much bigger cat to deal with this mouse!" Ash boasted.

"Pikapi!" Pikachu empathically added.

The referee lowered both flags in a chopping motion. "Begin!"

~Challenger Ash (Pikachu, ?, ?) VS Gym Leader Maria (Felunge, ?, ?)~

"Pikachu, let's start with Quick Attack!" Ash ordered.

"Pika!" Pikachu said, before dashing forward towards his feline opponent, leaving a trail of fading white light behind.

"Counter it with Brick Break!" Maria ordered.

"Fel!" Felunge meowed, as one of its paws started to glow white, and the moment Pikachu leaped towards it, it slammed its glowing paw onto Pikachu's head, sending the electric mouse bouncing backwards.

"Pikachu!" Ash cried.

"Well done, Felunge! Now, Fury Swipes!" Maria ordered.

Felunge's claws seemed to grow twice their size, while also glowing with a white light, as the Nimble Cat Pokemon moved to slice

Pikachu. On his part, Pikachu did his best to dodge and evade all the slashing swipes aimed at him, while being pushed back. Pikachu tripped and fell on his back. Felunge smirked, and leaped into the air while raising one of its claws, ready to deliver a brutal strike.

Fortunately, Pikachu rolled on his back just as Felunge's claw smashed against the ground, opening a small crater, and the Mouse Pokemon jumped back to his feet.

"Well done, Pikachu! Now, use Thunderbolt!" Ash said.

"Pikaaaa... !" this time, it was Pikachu who jumped into the air, as sparks jumped from his cheeks, before his body releasing a powerful bolt of electricity towards his Normal-type enemy.

"CHUUUUUUUUUUU!"

"Felunge, dodge it with Dig!" Maria shouted.

Felunge jumped into the air, spinning its body rapidly until it became a living tornado, before drilling itself underground just as the Thunderbolt passed towards him.

Ash smirked confidently. "Let me show you what we do with Pokemon who think they can escape from us by going underground! Pikachu, Iron Tail on the field!"

"What?" Maria asked in surprise.

Pikachu jumped into the air, his tail glowing with a silvery sheen, before he slammed his tail into the battleground, smashing a large hole on it and sending many rocks flying in every direction. And most importantly, forcing Felunge out into the open once again.

"And Iron Tail again!" Ash commanded.

"Block it with Shadow Claw!" Maria ordered.

"Pika!" Pikachu shouted, as he leaped towards the still airborne Felunge, swinging his tail against it. Felunge's claws were coated in

a black ghostly aura, and used them to parry Pikachu's Steel-type move. However, it wasn't enough, and Felunge was sent crashing against the ground, while Pikachu landed on his feet.

...

Meanwhile, back on the bleachers, Maria's kids were cheering, mostly for her, but also because they were enjoying the battle. Sitting near them were Ash's friends and Natalie.

"Whoa, I knew Ash was good, but not this good!" the Tandorian girl said. "I don't think I would have come up with something like using Iron Tail on the ground to counter Dig."

"Ash is a very experienced trainer. When you have fought as much as he has, coming up with new tactics quickly become a second nature," Serena explained. "When he started training me for Contest Battles, I didn't have much idea of complex tactics either, but the more we sparred, the easier it became."

"Let's hope it's true, because I don't think I'm going to get very far as a trainer if this is my competition," Natalie said.

...

Back on the battleground, despite Pikachu's direct hit, Felunge quickly jumped back to its feet, showing that it still had enough energy to continue the battle.

"Are you okay, Felunge?" Maria asked. The Nimble Cat Pokemon nodded, and its trainer smiled. "Good! This was just a little setback."

"This will be more than a mere setback! Pikachu, use Electroball! Rapid fire!" Ash ordered.

"Pika!" Pikachu jumped into the air, forming a sphere of yellow electricity on the tip of his tail, before tossing it at the Nimble Cat Pokemon, followed by another, and another, and another.

"Do you plan to exhaust Felunge by either forcing it to dodge or to parry, but that's not going to work. Felunge, grab one of those boulders and use it as a shield!" Maria ordered.

"Lunge!" Felunge said, as it ran towards one of the many boulders that Pikachu's Iron Tail had scattered around the battleground, grabbed one almost as big as the feline Pokemon was, and used it as a shield to absorb the incoming barrage of electric spheres.

"What?" now, it was Ash's turn to be surprised.

"You don't get to be a champion if you don't know how to think outside the box," Maria said. "Now Felunge, grab onto that boulder, and move towards Pikachu!"

"Fe, lunge!" the Nimble Cat Pokemon said, rushing forward.

"Not a bad idea, but your plan has a glaring hole in it!" Ash said. "Pikachu, Iron Tail on that boulder!"

"Chu!" Pikachu said, as his tail once again glowed with a metallic sheen, and slammed it against the boulder, shattering it to pieces, and sending Felunge flying backwards.

"Felunge!" Maria cried.

"Pikachu, Thunderbolt!" Ash ordered.

"Pika... CHUUUUU!" Pikachu yelled, releasing once again a powerful electric blast.

This time, Felunge was unable to dodge, and took the full brunt of Pikachu's most powerful attack, letting out a shrill meow of pain. The bipedal cat dropped to one knee.

"And finish with Iron Tail!" Ash said.

"Pikapikapikapika... !" Pikachu said, rushing towards the weakened Felunge, his tail glowing once more.

"Felunge, Attract!" Maria called.

"Oh no! Pikachu, stop!" Ash shouted.

Felunge waved her arms, sending a flurry of pink hearts towards the incoming Pikachu. Unfortunately for Pikachu, he had no time nor space to either stop to a halt or even maneuver around the attack, and the pink hearts reached him. Pikachu's own eyes turned into hearts and his mouth formed a goofy grin as he looked enthralled at Felunge.

"That was a close one, huh?" Maria said, sighing in relief. "I think I should have used that move earlier. Oh well, no point in mulling over roads not taken. Felunge, Shadow Claw!"

"Feeeeeel!" Felunge meowed, as her claws were coated in the same ghostly aura as before, and delivered a couple of painful spectral slashes at the spellbound Pikachu.

"Pikachu, move!" Ash shouted.

But Pikachu continued standing there, besotted, and taking Felunge's attacks, pain not even registering in his brain.

"Felunge, now Fury Swipes!" Maria ordered.

"Pikachu, snap out of it!" Ash begged.

But Ash's pleas fell on deaf ears, and Pikachu once again took the full brunt of Felunge's attack, who swiped time after time after time, pushing Pikachu backwards.

"Finish with Brick Break!" Maria ordered.

That moment, the effect of Attract finally ended, and Pikachu snapped back to his senses, much to Ash's joy and relief.

"Yes! Now quickly!"

However, Pikachu winced and fell to his non-existent knees as a wave of pain washed over his small body, now feeling the effects of the attacks he took while under the effect of Attract. And that didn't allow him to dodge in time, and the Brick Break connected, sending Pikachu falling backwards.

"Pikachu!" Ash cried.

Pikachu landed on his back, his arms and legs sprawling on the ground. Grunting in pain, the electric rodent tried get back to his feet, but was unable to.

The referee raised a flag in Maria's direction. "Pikachu can't fight anymore! The winner is Felunge!"

...

"YAAAAAAAAAAAAAY!" the schoolchildren cheered in unison, happy that their teacher was in the lead now.

Naturally, Ash's friends didn't share their joy, as they watched with a bit of worry as the Pallet Town native walked over Pikachu, scooped it between his arms, and brought him to his side of the battlefield, while he whispered something, probably some words of encouragement or reassurance.

"I can't believe Pikachu just lost like that..." Bonnie lamented.

"Yeah, he was about to win, and then BAM! Attract!" Natalie said, raising her hands in the air. "If her Felunge knew that attack, why didn't she used it before?"

"She was clearly keeping it as some sort of last resort. I imagine she wanted to see if her Felunge could beat Pikachu without using it," Clemont explained. "A good trainer never reveals all their cards at once."

"And now Ash has lost one of his two most veteran Pokemon," Bonnie pointed out.

"It doesn't matter. I'm sure Ash will find a way to turn the match around," Serena said as she watched Ash reaching for the pokeballs buckled to his belt. "The match has only begun."

...

"Birbie, I choose you!"

Ash tossed the pokeball forward, releasing his first and so far only Tandorian Pokemon.

"Bir, birbie!" Birbie chirped, as he was released from the capture device.

Maria quirked an eyebrow, and shook her head. "First a mouse, now a little bird? Tsk, tsk."

"You're about to discover that this little bird packs quite the big punch," Ash retorted.

"Birbie versus Felunge! Begin!" the referee said.

"Given that you already know about Attract, no point in hiding it anymore. Felunge, Attract!" Maria ordered.

"Feeeeeel!" Felunge meowed, as she waved her paws, releasing a flurry of pink energy hearts.

"Birbie, fly around to dodge them!" Ash ordered.

Birbie did as was commanded, and began to fly high in circles around the battleground, easily dodging the heart-shaped projectiles.

"Now Birbie, use Air Cutter!" Ash ordered. "Then get close to Quick Attack!"

"Dodge!"

Keeping distance, Birbie's wings began to glow with a faint blue light, before flapping them twice, releasing a pair of crescent-shaped blades of wind, which the Nimble Cat Pokemon gracefully dodged, missing their mark. But while the feline Pokemon was busy dodging, Birbie shot towards her, leaving behind a trail of fading white light.

"Getting close and personal? A daring strategy, Ash, but a foolish one!" Maria said. "Felunge, Brick Break!"

Felunge raised one of her paws, which began to glow with a white light, ready to smack the Eden Bird Pokemon the moment he got any closer.

"Birbie, Flash, now!" Ash shouted.

"What?"

Birbie's crest under his beak started to glow, before it exploded in a burst of blinding white light, causing everybody to shield their eyes, and for Felunge to cancel her Brick Break. The Nimble Cat Pokemon hissed in pain as the sudden burst of light left her temporarily blind.

"Birbie, quickly, use Gust!" Ash commanded.

"BiiirBIE!" Birbie chirped, as he flapped his wings as fast as he could, creating a tornado around the blinded Felunge that lifted her into the air.

"Follow with Quick Attack!"

Birbie barreled towards the airborne Felunge, slamming against her body with as much strength as the little bird could muster. Then a second time. Then another, and another and another. The last Quick Attack send Felunge pummeling down, before she crashed against the ground with a painful boom.

And just like Pikachu before, Felunge didn't appear that she could move anymore. The referee raised a flag.

"Felunge can't fight anymore! The winner is Birbie!"

Maria sighed, and returned Felunge to her pokeball. "Good job, girl. Take a rest."

...

Now, it was the schoolkids who were disappointed, while Ash's friends

"Yes!" Bonnie cheered. "They're even."

"Man, that Birbie is a beast in a cutie clothing," Natalie commented, remembering her own battle against the bird.

"Well, Pikachu had softened Maria's Felunge, so Birbie only had to deliver the finishing blows," Clemont said. "Fortunately, Birbie hardly had to spend much energy fighting Felunge, so he should be good for whatever Pokemon Maria sends next."

"Here goes my next Pokemon. Go, Kinetmunk!" Maria said, tossing the pokeball forward.

The capture device opened, releasing Maria's second Pokemon. It was a slender, quadrupedal rodent with long legs. It was covered in yellow fur, with blue markings above its green eyes and around its back, and a long tail of the same color.

Ash pulled his Pokedex out to scan it.

" Kinetmunk, the Chipmunk Pokemon, and Chynimunk's evolution. Normal/Electric. They dig intricate tunnels that can stretch for miles underground. They use small electrical pulses to relax their muscles, allowing them to run faster."

Serena saw Clemont wince upon hearing the typing. Not only it was going to be an uphill battle for Birbie, but that Kinetmunk could pose a threat to Greninja as well. Ash didn't share their friend's worry, having proven in past matches that type advantage wasn't everything.

...

"Birbie versus Kinetmunk, begin!" the referee said.

"Kinetmunk, fry that bird with Discharge!" Maria ordered.

"Birbie, counter it with Air Cutter!" Ash replied.

"Munk!"

"Birb!"

Kinetmunk's body crackled with yellow electricity, before sending multiple bolts of electricity at Birbie, while Birbie flapped his wings, sending several blades of wind to meet the electric attack. The two moves met in the middle, resulting in an explosion.

"Kinetmunk, get close with Quick Attack!" Maria ordered.

"Use Quick Attack too, Birbie!" Ash ordered as well.

The Eden Bird Pokemon and the Chipmunk Pokemon dashed towards each other, moving so fast they left a trail of brief afterimages in their wake. The two Normal-type Pokemon slammed against each other, the clash resulting in a gust of wind that blew in every direction, and for a fraction of a second, it appeared as if their strength was equal, before Birbie lost the struggle and was sent flying backwards.

"Birbie, no!" Ash called. "Quickly, regain your balance!"

"Time to press our advantage Kinetmunk! Use Super Fang!"

"Kineeeee... !" Kinetmunk yelled while it charged towards Birbie, as its buckteeth started to glow with a white light, tripling in length.

"Birbie, keep Kinetmunk away from you with Gust!"

"Birbirbirbir... !" Birbie chirped as he flapped his wings as fast as he could, producing a strong gust of wind.

While the Gust did little to damage the electric squirrel, it at least managed to slow it on its tracks.

"Good job Birbie! Now blind it with Flash!" Ash ordered.

"Not a second time! Kinetmunk, close your eyes, quickly!" Maria ordered.

"Bir-BIE!" Birbie chirped, as the crest on his chest glowed brightly, covering the battleground in white light, forcing everybody to shield their eyes a second time.

Unfortunately for Birbie, Kinetmunk heeded Maria's advice, and was able to close its eyes shut before Birbie's attack could blind it like it did to Felunge.

"Now Kinetmunk, use Quick Attack again to get closer!" Maria said. Even if she couldn't see, she knew that Birbie was in front of Kinetmunk and wouldn't have time to move, given that the Flying-type Pokemon was channeling two attacks at once.

Kinetmunk's teeth returned to normal as Super Fang was cancelled, and dashed forward, the attack allowing it to move faster than it normally would overpowering the effect of the Gust, before slamming its body against the smaller Pokemon.

"B-BIRB!" Birbie cried upon being smacked backwards.

"Now, hit him with Aqua Tail!" Maria ordered.

Kinetmunk's blue tail was coated in water as it swung its limb at Birbie, still reeling from the quick attack. The water around Kinetmunk's tail exploded the moment it impacted against Birbie, sending the Eden Bird Pokemon crashing down against the ground.

"Birbie, no!" Ash said in desperation.

"Finish it with Spark!" Maria said.

"Kinet-MUNK!" Kinetmunk's body was surrounded by a yellow electric aura, and launched itself towards Birbie. Just like with the previous attack, there was an electric explosion once the move hit its mark, releasing lightning bolts everywhere.

The super effective move was too much for the poor Birbie, who fell on his back to the ground, body covered in burn marks and his eyes swirly.

The referee raised a flag in Maria's direction. "Birbie can't fight anymore, the winner is Kinetmunk!"

Ash let out a sigh as he returned his Tandorian Pokemon. "Good job, Birbie. You did your best."

...

"Now Ash is only down to Greninja," Natalie lamented. "And he has to beat an Electric-type Pokemon."

"It's okay, Greninja is super strong! He'll beat that squirrel, you'll see!" Bonnie reassured the brown haired girl.

"Nene!" Dedenne said, sharing the blonde's enthusiasm.

"Even if Greninja beats Kinetmunk, there's also Maria's last Pokemon," Clemont added. "Which no doubt will be her strongest one."

"Ash can do it," Serena reassured. "He has overcome odds far worse than this one."

...

"Greninja, I choose you!" Ash said, tossing his last pokeball.

The pokeball opened, releasing Ash's strongest Kalosian Pokemon, as well as the strongest Water-type he ever caught.

"Ninja!"

Maria's mouth curved into a smirk, while Ash could see a glint of expectation in her eyes. "And there it is. Your famous Greninja. I'd never imagine that I'd have the chance to battle it."

"I'm sure Greninja will surpass all your expectations," Ash replied.

"In that case... Kinetmunk, use Discharge!" Maria ordered.

"Munk!" Kinetmunk happily replied, as it coated its body in electricity before firing multiple lightning bolts at the Ninja Pokemon.

"Dodge it with Double Team!" Ash ordered.

A multitude of Greninja copies flashed into existence, filling the battleground with blue. Kinetmunk's electric bolts managed to destroy some, but most of them remained.

"Dispel them with Quick Attack!" Maria ordered.

Once again, the Chipmunk Pokemon dashed like crazy through the battleground, clashing against every Greninja copy in its way easily reducing their numbers.

"Greninja, stop it with Aerial Ace!" Ash ordered.

The original Greninja moved towards the still running Kinetmunk, his arms and feet glowing with a white light as he prepared the attack,

and delivered a powerful blow to the gut of the Normal and Electric Type Pokemon, stopping it on its tracks.

"Very good, Greninja! Follow with Night Slash!" Ash said.

Greninja's limbs stopped glowing white, before he unsheathed a sword made of pure darkness out of a seemingly nonexistent sheath, and delivered a pair of brutal slashes to Kinetmunk, sending the electric rodent crashing back against the ground.

"Kinetmunk!" Maria cried. "Are you okay?"

In response, the Chipmunk Pokemon jumped back on its four feet, and shook its head to snap out of the dizziness result of such assault. "Kin!"

"Good," Maria's eyes rested on Ash's Pokemon. "Perhaps going on the offensive like that was a mistake..."

"Greninja, Water Shuriken!" Ash called.

Greninja jumped into the air, watery stars forming on each hand, and tossed them at Kinetmunk. Maria, however, had already planned a counterattack.

"Kinetmunk, dodge them with Quick Attack!" Maria ordered. "Use it to get closer!"

"Munk!" Kinetmunk said, as it began to move as faster than normal speed, almost becoming a yellow and blue blur.

Kinetmunk quickly sidestepped just before a Water Shuriken could hit it, and once the Chimpunk Pokemon was close enough to Greninja, it leaped at him.

"Greninja, use Aerial Ace!" Ash ordered.

"Now, Discharge!" Maria shouted.

Once again, Kinetmunk's body started to crackle with electricity, before sending a barrage of lightning bolts at Greninja. At such close distance, it was impossible for the Ninja Pokemon to dodge. Greninja croaked in pain as electricity coursed through his body.

"GREEEEEEEE... !"

"Greninja!" Ash cried.

"Keep pressing on, Kinetmunk! Super Fang!" Maria ordered.

Kinetmunk charged once again towards Greninja, its front teeth glowing and extending until they extended beyond its face, and leaped towards the Kalosian Pokemon, ready to sink its teeth on its flesh.

"Parry it with Night Slash!" Ash ordered.

Greninja once again summoned a sword of pure darkness, and raised it just in time to block Kinetmunk's attack. The two Pokemon struggled there for a second, before Greninja's superior strength managed to push it back, bouncing against the ground multiple times, but landing on its feet.

"Finish with Aerial Ace!" Ash said.

"Spark!" was Maria's order.

Greninja's sword of darkness disappeared, as his forearms glowed with a white light, dashing towards the electric rodent. Kinetmunk, meanwhile, coated its entire body in electricity, and rushed towards the Ninja Pokemon.

The two Pokemon clashed. There was a flash of electricity followed by two cries of pain, culminating in an explosion that once again, lunged Kinetmunk backwards. The Chipmunk Pokemon landed on its back, eyes closed shut and teeth gritted, its entire body twitching

in pain. That last hit marked the end of the fight for the Normal and Electric-type.

"Kinetmunk can't fight anymore! The winner is Greninja!" the referee announced.

Maria returned her fallen Kinetmunk, not looking bothered by the loss in the slightest. "You did great, Kinetmunk. Take a rest."

"We did it Greninja!" Ash cheered. "One more fight and-"

"G-Gre!" Greninja flinched, as several electric sparks jumped from his body.

...

"Oh no. This is bad. This is really bad," Clemont said, looking worried.

"What's wrong with Greninja?" Bonnie asked, sharing the same mood as her brother.

"Paralyzed?" Serena repeated.

"Unfortunately, so it seems. That last Spark... Maria knew that Kinetmunk was on the verge of defeat, that's why she ordered it to use Spark. Spark has a good chance to inflict paralysis on the opponent," Clemont explained. "Maria will be saving her strongest Pokemon for last. And for Greninja to beat it with such a handicap..."

"Alright, here goes my last Pokemon!" they heard Maria said, as she pulled out another pokeball. "Kiricorn, go!"

The pokeball opened, releasing Maria's last Pokemon... and Serena almost forgot to breathe when her eyes laid upon it.

Kiricorn was a horse-like Pokemon, with white skin, a soft pink mane, and a long, fluffy tail of the same color. It had two horns curving outwards at the sides of its head, as well as blue, antler-like

horn in the middle of its forehead. Kiricorn reared upon being released, and let out a loud neigh.

In Serena's opinion, it was the most beautiful Pokemon she had ever seen.

"OH MY GOODNESS! IT'S SO CUUUUUUTE!" Bonnie squealed. The younger girl apparently shared Serena's opinion.

...

" Kiricorn, the Unicorn Pokemon, and one of Minicorn's possible evolutions. Normal/Fairy. The hair in its mane is made of gossamer-thin threads and is impossibly soft. It will only allow those it trusts to touch it." The Pokedex said upon being scanned.

While the Pokedex's initial description didn't mention its fighting prowess, Ash knew that Kiricorn would be a very challenging opponent. And that was without getting Greninja's paralysis into account.

The referee raised both flags. "Greninja versus Kiricorn, begin!"

"That Greninja can barely stand. Let's give him a quick and merciful defeat! Kiricorn, use Mega Horn!" Maria ordered.

Kiricorn neighed, and galloped forward while lowering its head, a large green aura in the form of a spike glowing around its middle horn.

"Greninja, jump above Kiricorn and use Water Shuriken!" Ash commanded.

Greninja did as he was told, and evaded the Bug-type attack with a well timed jump. A pair of water shuriken appeared on each of his hands while he was mid air. However, before he could throw them, the paralysis acted up, causing the Ninja Pokemon to wince, and for

the attack to be cancelled. Still, he was able to fight the paralysis in order to at least land on his feet.

"Kiricorn, Moonblast!" Maria shouted.

Kiricorn turned around, and formed a pink and white sphere of energy in front of its head, before firing it at Greninja.

"Greninja, counter it with Night Slash!" Ash ordered.

A sword of darkness formed around Greninja's right hand, and with a mighty slash, the Moonblast was shattered into a rain of white and pink sparkles, even if the sword was destroyed as well.

"If we were in a contest, that maneuver would have costed me quite a few points," Maria observed. "But unfortunately for you, we aren't in a contest. Kiricorn, Moonblast again!"

"Greninja, use Double Team!" Ash shouted.

Just as Kiricorn fired the second Moonblast, dozen of Greninja copies filled the battleground. The Fairy-type projectile merely hit one of the duplicates, which vanished instantly.

Maria, however, wasn't fazed in the slightest. "That's not going to work against us! Kiricorn, Earthquake!"

Letting out a loud neigh, Kiricorn reared before bringing its front legs down, the battleground violently shaking the moment its hooves slammed the ground, sending seismic shockwaves through. The effect was immediate, and most of the Greninja copies quickly vanished, while the real one suffered the effects of the Ground-type attack, and was blasted backwards by a seismic shock.

"Greninja!" Ash cried. *"This is bad! We haven't even landed a single hit, and Maria's Kiricorn continues to wear us down!"*

"Moonblast again!" Maria ordered.

"Parry it again with Night Slash!" Ash ordered.

Kiricorn fired yet another orb of pink and white light, and once again, it was shattered by Greninja's Night Slash.

"I'll give you something you won't be able to parry! Kiricorn, use Flamethrower!" Maria said.

"We won't be able to parry it, but can still counter it! Greninja, Water Shuriken!" Ash replied.

Orange flames billowed from Kiricorn's mouth, before the Unicorn Pokemon opened its mouth, releasing a torrent of flames towards Greninja, just as a pair of blue liquid shuriken formed on each of his hands. Thankfully, the paralysis didn't kick in, and Greninja successfully threw them. The two opposing elements clashed, and nullified each other in a cloud of steam.

"Greninja, quickly! Use Aerial Ace!" Ash ordered.

Greninja crossed the battleground at such speed, he split the cloud of steam in two. His forearms started to glow with a white light, and once he was in close combat distance, and delivered several swipes at Kiricorn.

"Counter with Mega Horn!" said Maria.

"Use Water Shuriken as a shield!" Ash replied.

Kiricorn's antler-like horn was surrounded by a greenish-yellow aura in the form of a spike, while Greninja created a rather large shuriken out of water. When Kiricorn tried to gore the Ninja Pokemon with its piercing attack, Greninja blocked it with his liquid shuriken. Unfortunately, it was unable to absorb all the force of the impact, and the shuriken exploded into thousands of droplets while Greninja was blasted backwards. After bouncing on his back a couple times, the Kalosian Pokemon landed on his feet.

Keeping his spirits high, Ash decided to play the last card in his hand, trusting it would be able to turn the tide of the battle.

"Alright Greninja, time to go all out! The two of us, together!" Ash said.

As the bond between Ash and Greninja became stronger, a torrent of water exploded around Greninja, before taking the form of a spiraling column of water. Though their shared bond, Ash could sense how Greninja's power grew, and as a response to that growth, his body changed to adapt to it.

"Gre!" Greninja cried within the vortex, and Ash could feel him flinch.

There was something wrong. The transformation was taking too long. Was it because of the paralysis? Whatever the reason, this didn't go unnoticed to the Gym Leader.

"Kiricorn, quickly, use Mega Horn! Don't let him complete the transformation!" Maria shouted.

Kiricorn neighed, and galloped towards the still transforming Greninja as his middle horn glowed with a greenish-yellow aura. Unlike the previous attempts, the move connected, and Greninja was sent flying backwards out of the spiraling water tower by the super effective attack, landing painfully on his side.

"Greninja, quickly, you need to get up!" Ash urged, waving his arms at him.

Letting out a croak of pain, Greninja ignored at best as he could how much his body hurt, and tried to get back on his feet and continue the fight. Unfortunately for the amphibian, Maria wasn't going to let him.

"Moonblast," was all what Maria said.

Kiricorn fired the powerful Fairy-type move, and the pink and white orb of light blasted Greninja, resulting in a blast of light of the same color, followed by a cloud of magenta smoke.

"Greninja... !"

And once the smoke dispelled, it revealed Greninja, lying on the ground, his body twitching, but otherwise motionless.

The referee raised a flag in Maria's direction. "Greninja can't fight anymore! Since Ash has lost three Pokemon, the winner of the match is Maria!"

As the crowd of children sitting in the bleachers cheered, Ash stood there, motionless, unblinking, as if his brain was still trying to process the loss. Then, his head dropped and his shoulders slumped before recalling the fainted Greninja.

"Good job buddy. Sorry I wasn't up to par," Ash whispered.

"For all that's it worth," Maria said, as she started to walk towards him. She had already recalled her Kiricorn. "I think it was a pretty good fight. Guess I was lucky that I managed to paralyze your Greninja with Kinetmunk's last Spark."

"Still, you fought better than me, no point in denying that," Ash replied, before adding. "I... I want a rematch!"

"Sure," Maria replied. "But first, take a day or two to train a little. Maybe catch more Pokemon so you have more options in battle."

"Ash!"

Ash turned around, and saw his friends as well as Natalie walking towards him. Ash could also see Maria's children, talking among themselves no doubt happy that their teacher defeated the challenger, being escorted out of the battleground by the referee.

"Hey Ash, sorry about your loss," Clemont said.

"Are you okay?" Serena asked, looking at him with concern in her eyes.

"It will be alright," Ash said. He tried to put on a brave face. "I mean, you remember Kalos, right? This isn't the first time I lose to a Gym Leader. Plus, you heard Maria, she gave me a rematch."

"Whenever you decide to return, I'll be waiting for you," Maria gently said, before her eyes rested on Natalie. "So, if I remember correctly, you wanted to challenge me to, right?"

Natalie, however took a step back and shook her head, reacting as if she was asked to do a potentially suicidal dare. "After what I just saw? Hell no!"

"I'm not going to use those Pokemon against a beginner trainer. Gym Leaders have weaker teams to fight against trainers with few or no badges such as yourself," Maria explained.

"Even then, Ash here taught me that even barely trained Pokemon can be a force to be reckoned with if they are coached by a competent trainer," Natalie rebutted. "Aside from my starter, I only have another Pokemon I literally caught yesterday. So I think I'm going to take a few days to train, and maybe catch more Pokemon."

Maria nodded. "As you wish. Challenging a Gym unprepared is nothing but foolish, so I applaud your decision to make sure you're ready. Like I told Ash, whenever you want to come, you'll find the gates of my Gym open."

"Come on guys, let's go," Ash said.

And thus, the group left Maria's Gym. Though, unlike what Ash was hoping, he didn't leave it with his first Tandor badge in his possession.

Author's Note: Yeah, Ash lost. I mean, I did say that Tandor Gym Leaders were pretty tough, didn't I?

Also, fun facts about Maria:

-Maria being a teacher is something I came up with, since in the game her gym trainers are all schoolchildren, so I said, why not?

-In the game, Kiricorn can't learn Flamethrower (it can learn Fire Blast, though), but Maria's Kiricorn knows Flamethrower for some reason.

-Also in the game, when you first get to the Gym is closed since Maria often oversleeps. A stalker then gives you a copy of her house's keys so you can enter and wake up her up. Needless to say, she's rather pissed with both you and the stalker, which already had a restraining order. This was supposed to mock the RPG convention of the main character freely entering other people's houses, but you can imagine why I removed it.

About the rematch, don't worry, I promise you won't have to wait much about it. In the meantime, don't forget to leave a review!

School's Out

Chapter 8 :

School's Out

Nowtoch City

After taking his Pokemon to the Pokemon Center, Ash had told his friends that he needed to take a walk to clear out his thoughts. All of them, especially Serena, had looked at him with concern, but they had respected his decision. Perhaps they remembered the way Ash reacted the last time he lost a Gym Battle.

True to her word, Natalie had left Nowtoch city in order to catch more Pokemon and do some additional training. And Ash knew he needed to do that too. Not now, though, given that his Pokemon needed to recover.

Ash walked through the beautiful city, not knowing what to do since his Pokemon were out of commission for the time being -and wondered if he should try to find a hobby to fill the time during these kind of moments- before he saw a park, like an oasis of green in a sea of gray and black. There were several kids playing with some small Pokemon, and what Ash presumed were their parents sitting on benches.

The Pallet Town native moved towards one of the empty benches and basically let his body slump against it. While Ash was known as somebody with too much energy to take a moment to relax, defeats like this one left him drained, and the quietude was something both his body and mind appreciated. So for the next half an hour all Ash did was sit on a bench, and relax.

"Hey."

The voice snapped Ash from his thoughts, or better said, from the void that was his mind right now. A little startled, Ash realized that Serena was in front of him.

"Hey," he replied. His voice lacked its usual energy, something that didn't go unnoticed to Serena.

Serena shifted in her spot as she held her blue ribbon with one hand. "Do you mind if I sit?"

Wordlessly, Ash slidded to the side in order to give Serena room, and the honey blonde took a seat besides him. The two of them spent a couple minutes sitting there, completely silent.

"Sooo..." Serena began, hesitating as if carefully choosing her next words. "... still thinking about the loss? "

"Is it that obvious?" Ash sighed. "I'd lie if I'd say I'm peachy. Major defeats are always hard to stomach, no matter how many times they happen."

"I know how you feel. Remember that I lost my very first contest not long ago," Serena reminded him. "But that doesn't mean I'm going to give up. And you shouldn't either. Never give up until the end, remember?"

Ash cracked a hint of a smile upon hearing that. "Using my own words against me, huh?"

"Maybe you needed to hear them from somebody else," Serena replied.

Ash couldn't help but notice a certain edge to her voice. Guessing what was troubling her, he showed her a reassuring smile. "You know Serena, if you're worried that this is going to be Wulfric all over again, I can assure you it won't be the case."

This seemed to alleviate Serena somewhat, given that she looked as if a crushing pressure had left her body. "Good! Because we weren't going to have a repeat of the Winding Woods! Is there anything I can do? If you need to talk to someone, I'm here, and you can tell me everything-"

"Serena," Ash interrupted her, looking at her in the eyes. "I'm fine. I promise."

"Y-You sure?" she asked.

"As fine as I can be," Ash replied. "I... I just need some time, you know? To get my thoughts back in order. And to think what I'm going to do to defeat Maria. She did raise some valid points. I should have trained more before facing her. Maybe I also need more Pokemon."

"You have plenty of Pokemon at Professor Oak's lab. Why don't you have Oak send some of them to you?" Serena asked. As those words left her lips, another realization hit her. "Now that I think about it... how is it that you left all the Pokemon you caught in Kalos back in Kanto? I mean, you weren't even planning to bring Greninja to begin with. I'm sure that if you had Hawlucha or Talonflame or Noivern you would have made short work of Maria's Pokemon."

"Because... well, it's a little hard to put into words," Ash began. "Let's say... it's part of the journey? As in, every region has Pokemon unique to them, and I feel that catching Pokemon native to the region is an important part of the experience of visiting a new place."

"I see," Serena nodded. "Though, maybe you could still bring some of your older Pokemon too as well, and gradually replace them as you catch and train new ones?"

"That's what I tried to do the first time I visited another region," Ash replied. "After returning from the Orange Islands, I went to Johto, and took most of my Pokemon there. I also caught quite a few Pokemon in Johto, but given that my Kanto Pokemon were much more experienced and stronger, I ended up relying on them too

much and didn't give the Pokemon I caught in Johto the attention they deserved.

"It's also a matter of keeping my skills honed. I could have brought the likes of Snorlax, Sceptile or Infernape, which would have made this journey way easier, but if I did that, I'd become complacent and my skill as a trainer would stagnate. On the other hand, catching wild Pokemon and raising them into a team able to compete in a Pokemon League? Now that's a challenge that makes all my victories feel earned."

Ash's mind replayed his victory over Natalie's Raptorch using his freshly caught Birbie. The proof of what a well coached Pokemon could do, even if it lacked power and experience.

"I... haven't thought of that," Serena said. "Why did you allow Greninja to come with you, then?"

"Because he asked to come," Ash flatly replied. Sensing Serena's slight incredulity, he decided to elaborate. "Normally, most of my Pokemon feel satisfied after one adventure, and see their stay at Oak as a well deserved retirement. You saw Greninja when he came to us: Kalos wasn't enough for him. He wasn't satisfied with his run through Kalos. And hey... this was Greninja's first big fight in Tandor, yet I was unable to help him claim victory."

Serena placed placed a hand on Ash's knee, and gave him a reassuring look. "Come on Ash, I'm sure Greninja knows you did your best, and that you can't win all the time. The only way Greninja would be truly disappointed in you it's if you decided to give up."

"Never give up until the end," Ash repeated, and he and Serena smiled. "Yes, you're right. We might have lost, but it's not the end of the world. Maria gave us another chance, and we aren't going to waste it."

Serena nodded. "That's what I wanted to hear. What do you plan to do?"

"Maria has already seen what Pikachu, Birbie and Greninja can do. I need to throw her off balance, come up with something she wouldn't expect," Ash began. "Maybe I should go back to Passage Cave to train. The Pokemon there are pretty rough, so Pikachu, Greninja and Birbie could get a pretty good training there."

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Passage Cave

A few hours later, in the afternoon, Nurse Joy told Ash that all his Pokemon were now fully healed and ready to go. The rest also did Ash some good, as the Pallet Town native appeared to be in a better place mentally than he was in the aftermath of his defeat, and was ready to do anything it took to win that gym badge.

Per Ash's own suggestion, the group decided to return to Passage Cave. Not that they were overly excited with the idea, given what they had to do in order to cross it. Then again, he reassured them that they wouldn't go too far into the cave, just until they ran into a Pokemon. Which they didn't expect it would take long.

"You know... the cave seems awfully more silent than when we first crossed it," Clemont pointed out, as he directed the light from his Heliolisk-shaped lantern forward.

"It's almost eerie," Bonnie added.

"Maybe those groups of Pokemon are still leaderless?" Serena wondered. "I mean, that's why we taught them a lesson, right? So they would calm down for some time."

"Still, those Pokemon must be around here somewhere," Ash stated. "I mean, there used to be lots of them."

"Pi?" Pikachu asked, as his ears perked up. He then pointed somewhere in front of them. "Pikapi!"

"Clemont, light over there!" Ash said, pointing in the same direction.

Clemont did so, and the group saw a yellow and blue snake-like Pokemon looking back at them, seemingly startled.

"... parce?"

"Whoa! A Dunsparce!" Ash said, growing excited.

"Dunsparce? I thought that there were only Barewl, Grozard and Tonemy in this cave..." Bonnie said.

"That's true but... didn't the Ranger said that there were a bunch of Dunsparce here as well?" Clemont asked. "Maybe now that the other three groups of Pokemon calmed down, they decided to show up."

Since she had never seen this Pokemon before, in this case Serena pulled her Pokedex out in order to scan it.

" Dunsparce, the Land Snake Pokemon. Normal. Its drill-tipped tail is used to burrow into the ground backwards. This Pokémon is known to make its nest in complex shapes deep under the ground."

"Alright, this time Dunsparce won't escape me! Birbie, go!" Ash said, tossing Birbie's pokeball.

"Bir, birbie!" Birbie chirped after being released. He quickly noticed Dunsparce, and correctly identified him as the opponent to beat.

"This time?" Serena repeated. "Did you try to catch a Dunsparce before?"

"Yeah. But they always got away for one reason or another. Not this time, though," Ash confidently said. "Birbie, Quick Attack!"

"Bir!" Birbie chirped, before diving at Dunsparce, leaving a trail of fading white light behind him.

As Birbie attacked, Dunsparce did something no human or Pokemon expected in the slightest: He coiled into a ball and started to cry.

"Dun! Dunsparce! Duuuuun... !" the Land Snake Pokemon sobbed.

Birbie stopped to a halt mid air, and looked back at his trainer with a confused expression. "Birb?" He asked, almost wondering if Ash really wanted to fight that Pokemon.

"Uh..." Ash stuttered, as she scratched his cheek, taken aback by the unexpected reaction of the wild Pokemon. "I don't think we should attack a Pokemon that won't defend himself..."

"Well... it seems that Dunsparce doesn't have much of a fighting spirit," Serena said, looking at the coiled Pokemon with a bit of pity.

"Yeah Ash, better- WATCH OUT!" Clemont suddenly yelled.

"Pikapi!" Pikachu shouted as well.

Unfortunately, Clemont's warning came too late, and when Birbie had his back turned to Dunsparce, the Land Snake's Pokemon's expression changed from frightened to downright malicious, and delivered a brutal Headbutt at the unsuspecting bird.

"BIIIIIRB!" Birbie cried in pain, before turning around, and glared at Dunsparce with anger filled eyes.

"Did... did that Dunsparce pretend to cry and then attack from behind?" Serena asked in shock. It was the first time she saw a wild Pokemon display such an underhanded tactic.

"... what a jerk!" Bonnie yelled.

"Nenene!" Dedenne said, sharing Bonnie's indignation.

"Guess that Pokemon does have a fighting spirit after all. Even if rather unconventional," Ash said. He smirked as his determination

did nothing but grow in the face of this new challenge. "But we aren't going to buckle down! Birbie, use Air Cutter!"

"Bir! Birbie!" Birbie chirped, flapping his glowing wings, releasing crescent shaped blades of wind at Dunsparce.

The Normal-type Pokemon dodged one but was smacked by the other, blasting him backwards and landing on his back.

"Now Birbie, Quick Attack!" Ash commanded.

Birbie once again dived at Dunsparce, and this time, he wouldn't stop no matter what that snake would attempt to do. Dunsparce coiled into a ball again, not to appear defenseless, though, as he began to spin in place, before rolling at Birbie. The two Pokemon clashed, but Dunsparce was the clear winner of the bout as the Eden Bird Pokemon was smacked backwards.

"That was Rollout!" Clemont pointed out. "It seems that that Dunsparce knows something more than mere dirty tricks."

Once again, Dunsparce curled into a spinning ball, and launched himself at Birbie. This time, the speed at which Dunsparce spun and moved appeared to be much greater than before.

"Rollout is a move that becomes stronger if used consecutively. Fortunately, I know how to stop it," Ash thought. "Birbie, use Gust to lift Dunsparce from the ground!"

"Bir, birbie!" Birbie chirped, as he began to flap his little wings as fast as he could.

The winds blown by Birbie formed a tornado that easily lifted Dunsparce into the air. Not sensing the ground anymore, the Land Snake Pokemon stopped rolling and opened his eyes.

"Dunsparce!?" the startled Pokemon yelped.

"Now Birbie, Quick Attack!" Ash ordered.

Birbie barreled towards the airborne Dunsparce, slamming his body against that of his enemy, sending Dunsparce flying backwards until he crashed against a nearby wall.

"That must have hurt quite a bit," Ash observed. "A couple more moves, and Dunsparce will be ours! Birbie, Air Cutter again!"

Falpping his wings, Birbie send another pair of blades of wind towards the Land Snake Pokemon. Dunsparce jumped from the wall, began to spin his body becoming a yellow and blue tornado, and drilled into the ground.

"That was Dig!" Clemont pointed out.

"Well, the Pokedex said that Dunsparce dig tunnels..." Serena recalled.

"Alright! Birbie, don't get close to the ground! That way, Dunsparce won't be able to reach you!" Ash said.

"Birbie!" Birbie acknowledged, and did as he was instructed.

As Ash wondered where Dunsparce would emerge, he suddenly felt a small tremor below his feet. Looking down, he saw the ground cracking, before Dunsparce burst from underground and slammed his head against Ash's chest.

"AAAAAAGH!" Ash cried in pain, as he was launched backwards.

"Ash!" Serena, Clemont and Bonnie shouted in unison, rushing to help their friend.

"Pikaaaa!" Pikachu shouted, landing on all fours in front of Dunsparce, menacingly releasing sparks of electricity from his cheeks.

Unfortunately for Dunsparce, he paid for that dirty trick almost instantly, as he was left wide open to Birbie's counterattack, the

Eden Bird Pokemon nailing Dunsparce with a devastating Quick Attack, sending him flying against another wall.

"Bir, Birbie, BIR!" Birbie angrily chirped, his anger at Dunsparce growing even bigger. How dare that lowly worm attack his beloved trainer!

Meanwhile, Ash's friends helped him to get back on his feet.

"Ash, are you okay!?" A worried Serena asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I had it worse," Ash tried to downplay it, but even he had to admit that attack hurt quite a bit. "That Dunsparce's fighting style is sure something."

"Ash, you aren't planning to catch that Dunsparce, are you?" Clemont asked in disbelief.

"If anything, this makes me want to catch him more," Ash said, as he looked at Dunsparce.

Dunsparce shook his head to snap out of the dizziness caused by the hit, and focused his eyes once again on his avian opponent. He raised his drill-like tail, as a swirly, purple aura formed around it.

"Birbie, watch out! That's Poison Jab!" Ash warned, recognizing the attack.

Dunsparce launched tail-first at Birbie, the Eden Bird Pokemon dodged just in time. Dunsparce continued with the attack, forcing the Normal and Flying type Pokemon onto the defensive, until it finally struck him.

"B-bir... !" Birbie weakly chirped, as it coughed some purple bubbles.

"Birbie was poisoned!?" Bonnie asked, a little worried.

"Poison Jab has a small chance to poison a Pokemon. To poison Birbie on just one hit... that was such bad luck!" Clemont lamented.

"Fortunately, Birbie hasn't taken that much damage just yet."

Ash's brow furrowed in thought as Clemont's words sunk in, as if he realized something, before issuing the next command. "Birbie, Flash!"

"Biiir..." Birbie's crest started to glow with a white light. "BIEEEEEEE!"

Everybody shielded their eyes as the entire cave was bathed in a bright white light. Unfortunately for Dunsparce, the Land Sanke Pokemon didn't see the attack coming and was blinded by it.

"Dun! Dunsparaaaaarce... !" Dunsparce cried, as he flopped on the ground helplessly.

"Time to finish this! Birbie, Air Cutter!" Ash ordered.

Birbie launched two more blades of wind at Dunsparce, both projectiles finding their mark, sending Dunsparce crashing against yet another wall.

"Pokeball, go!" Ash said, tossing an empty pokeball at the downed Dunsparce.

The pokeball connected, and Dunsparce was turned into pure energy before being sucked into the capture device. The pokeball then fell to the ground, and wiggled a couple times, before it finally dinged, signaling a successful capture. Satisfied, Ash walked towards the pokeball, picked it up, and raised it like a trophy.

"Yes! I finally caught a Dunsparce!" Ash triumphantly said, as he raised the pokeball like a trophy. "And this Dunsparce is exactly what I need to win my rematch against Maria!"

However, rather than the usual cheers from his Pokemon upon having a new friend and teammate, Pikachu just crossed his arms and frowned, while Birbie merely glared at the pokeball in Ash's hand.

"Uh... yay?" Serena awkwardly said.

"Uhhhh..." Ash stammered, as he awkwardly lowered Dunsparce's pokeball, and opened his backpack. "I better get some antidote for Birbie..."

...

Nowtoch City

Right after the capture, Ash had taken both Dunsparce and Birbie to the Pokemon Center so they could be healed from the wounds they sustained from their battle. And once that was done, Ash headed towards the Center's battleground in the backyard, ready to introduce Dunsparce to the rest of his Pokemon.

"Come outside, everyone!" Ash said, releasing the pokeballs of Greninja and Birbie. As his two Pokemon materialized, Pikachu hopped from his shoulder in order to join them. "Meet the new member of our team, Dunsparce!" Ash said, releasing the Land Snake Pokemon. "Though Pikachu and Birbie already met him, hehe."

Pikachu and Birbie glared at the newest addition to the team, the former with his arms crossed and a scowl across his face, the attack on their beloved trainer still recent in their minds. Greninja, for his part, merely looked at him with a cautious but neutral eye.

Dunsparce looked at them as if they were below him. Or at least, to Birbie. He looked at Pikachu and Greninja with more caution, as if he could sense that they were on a completely different league than him and Birbie.

"I know we didn't start off on the right foot, but I'm sure we can all get along, right?" Ash hopefully asked.

"Pika!" Pikachu agreed, despite his initial reserves.

"Gren," Greninja agreed to, even if more subdued.

"Birb," Birbie agreed. He didn't like Dunsparce, but he was willing to give the new Pokemon a chance if Ash asked him to.

"See? What do you say, Dunsparce?" Ash asked.

After a moment of silence, Dunsparce let out a grunt of agreement. Despite Dunsparce's apparent reluctance, Ash took it as a good sign.

"In that case, let us begin with some training!" Ash said, looking at Dunsparce.

...

At the edge of the battleground, Serena also had her Pokemon out, ready to train some more with them once Ash was done. There was still some time until the next contest, but she didn't want another repeat of Kevlar Town.

"There you go!" Serena said, finishing the last touch. "What do you think, Selkid?"

Selkid looked at her tail, where Serena had tied the Mega Stone with a ribbon. The ribbon was elastic, so if Selkid evolved and her body grew, it would remain in place. She wagged her tail a couple times to test the attachment.

"Selkid!" Selkid happily said with a nod.

"Great! Now let's see if it stays in place during the training," Serena said.

Serena looked at the battleground, where all of Ash's Pokemon were training in what appeared to be a double battle of Pikachu and Dunsparce versus Greninja and Birbie. It seemed that Ash wanted to make the unruly Land Snake Pokemon to feel like a member of a team first and foremost, given the unusual choice of spar.

Like all the Pokemon living in Passage Cave, Dunsparce had a fierce temper and enough power to go with it, making him into a force to be reckoned with in the hands of a competent trainer. Then again, Serena was also a little worried that Ash may have his work cut out for him, given his rebellious personality.

Ash had Dunsparce fight against Pikachu this time, the latter holding back to better gauge where the Land Snake Pokemon was power and skill-wise. Dunsparce's battle style was... somewhat odd. It attempted to lure the opponent into lowering their guard by appearing to be less threatening than he was, before delivering a brutal strike. Of course, such tactics didn't work on a Pokemon that had already seen them, such as Pikachu.

Ash was trying to convince Dunsparce to fight like the rest of his Pokemon, mostly by praising the strength of his attacks and his clearly cunning mind. One attack Ash was putting some emphasis on was Rollout. He seemed to be familiar with the attack, and advised Dunsparce on how he could use the attack without being restricted to move in a straight line.

The Land Snake Pokemon seemed to obey Ash only reluctantly. Then again, if there was somebody who could do it, that was Ash. There wasn't a Pokemon that could resist the Pallet Town native's natural magnetism and charm.

...

Ash had spend almost the whole day training with his Pokemon, mostly Dunsparce, and went to bed that night with a sense of satisfaction. The next day, he woke up completely reinvigorated, and per his suggestion, the group returned to Maria's Gym for his rematch.

Once the receptionist called Maria to inform her of another challenger, the group headed towards the Gym's battleground, just as Maria and her referee escorted a group of schoolchildren to see the battle, just like the previous time. The children sat on the

bleachers while Maria and the referee moved to their positions on the battleground.

"You barely took time to lick your wounds, Ash," Maria said. "Are you sure a single day is enough to get ready for a rematch?"

Ash smirked confidently. "Plenty of things can be done in a day, Maria."

"If you say so," Maria said with a shrug. "You may know what Pokemon I'm going to use, but foresight is useless if one lacks the mean to change the events to come."

The referee raised both her flags. "This is an official Gym Battle between the Gym Leader Maria, and Ash Ketchum. The battle will be single format with no time limit, and each trainer will use up to three Pokemon. The battle will be over when one side has no more Pokemon remaining. Only the challenger may make substitutions. Trainers, select your first Pokemon."

"Felunge, go!" Maria said, tossing a pokeball forward.

"Fel!" Felunge said, as she was released from the capture device.

"What do you say, Pikachu? Ready for a rematch?" Ash asked his starter Pokemon.

"Pika!" Pikachu energetically nodded, and jumped from Ash's shoulder onto the battleground.

"Pikachu again?" Maria asked, sounding a little disappointed. "Did somebody ever tell you what's the definition of insanity, Ash?"

"This won't be like the last time. We know what your Pokemon can do and you won't catch us off guard," Ash replied.

"Perhaps. But you should keep in mind that I *a*lso know what your Pokemon can do," Maria rebuked.

The referee lowered both flags in a chopping motion. "Let the battle begin!"

~Challenger Ash (Pikachu, ?, ?) VS Gym Leader Maria (Felunge, Kinetmunk, Kiricorn)~

"The first move is ours! Pikachu, Thunderbolt!" Ash called.

"Pikaaaa!" Pikachu jumped into the air, his whole body shimmering with electricity. "CHUUUUUUUU!"

"Felunge, dodge it with Dig!" Maria shouted.

"Lunge!" Felunge jumped into the air, and began to rapidly spin, becoming a living drill and digging into the ground, just as Pikachu's Thunderbolt sailed past him.

"You should know that Dig is of no use against us!" Ash said.
"Pikachu, Iron Tail on the ground!"

"Pika!" Pikachu's tail began to glow with a silver sheen, before the Mouse Pokemon slammed his glowing limb into the battleground, shattering its surface, and sending many rocks and chunks of earth flying in multiple directions. "Chu?"

However, much to Pikachu and Ash's confusion, Felunge was nowhere to be seen.

"Uh?"

"Felunge, now!" Maria said.

Pikachu felt a small tremor under his feet, just before Felunge burst from underground, delivering a brutal swipe at the Electric-type Pokemon as she reappeared.

"But... how...?" Ash asked, wondered how his tactic had failed.

"You weren't the only one who have been training for this rematch, Ash," Maria began, a hint of a taunting smile on her lips. "I instructed Felunge to dig twice as deep into the earth as before, so she wouldn't be pulled out like before."

"Really clever," Ash replied.

"Our turn to attack! Felunge, use Shadow Claw!"

"Pikachu, dodge!"

Felunge launched herself towards Pikachu as she raised one of her paws, as it was encased in a dark purple aura shaped like sharp claws. When the spectral claws came down, Pikachu jumped sideways just in the nick of time, and Felunge's attack hit the ground, opening a small hole. Felunge continued delivering swipes with the Ghost-type move, with Pikachu struggling to dodge.

"Felunge, Attract!" Maria ordered.

"Use Quick Attack to get away from Felunge, now!" Ash ordered.

Felunge shot a flurry of pink energy hearts at Pikachu, who used the speed provided by Quick Attack to put some distance between him and the Nimble Cat Pokemon, while running in circles around her, dodging her attempts to seduce him. Once the stream of hearts started to die down, Ash decided it was time to counterattack.

"Pikachu, Electroball!" Ash ordered.

Pikachu raised his tail, and formed an orb of electricity on its tip, before jumping and flinging it towards the feline Pokemon.

"Use Dig again!" Maria ordered.

Once again, Felunge evaded Pikachu's electric attack by burrowing underground.

"Pika!" Pikachu turned at Ash, asking him what they were going to do now that their usual counter to Dig proved to be ineffective.

"I'm on it!" Ash replied, knowing that he only had a few seconds before Felunge ambushed Pikachu. Ash's eyes scanned the battleground, wondering if there was something they could use to stop Felunge's attack. Then, he saw the hole the cat Pokemon had dug, and he smiled as an idea dawned upon him. "Pikachu, jump into the hole Felunge just dug and use Thunderbolt!"

"Pika!" Pikachu nodded, and did what Ash told him, already knowing what was going to be the result. "CHUUUUUUUUUUU!"

Yellow electric bolts came from the hole, just as another hole was blasted from the underground, as a stream of lightning bolts launched Felunge into the air, before she fell to the ground with a loud thud.

"No!" Maria cried. "Felunge, are you alright?"

The Nimble Cat Pokemon, while hurt, had enough energy to continue the battle as she jumped to her feet and shook her head, before she hissed at Pikachu.

"Let's keep pressing on! Pikachu, Iron Tail!"

"Pika!" Pikachu jumped into the air as his tail glowed with a metallic sheen, and swung his hardened limb at the Nimble Cat Pokemon.

"Felunge, parry with Shadow Claw!"

Once again, a shadowy aura in the shape of sharp claws formed around Felunge's paws, and slashed at the incoming Iron Tail. Both attacks clashed, producing a burst of kinetic energy that pushed both Pokemon backwards, even if they landed on their feet. Felunge hissed in pain.

Ash noticed this, and smirked, already knowing how to win this. "Iron Tail again!"

"Shadow Claw again!"

Once again, the two Pokemon met in a clash between Ghost and Steel-type attacks, but this time, much to Maria's surprise, Pikachu overpowered Felunge, undoing the shadowy aura of her paws and sending her crashing backwards.

"What?"

"Time to finish this, Pikachu! Thunderbolt!"

"Pika... CHUUUUUU!"

Dazed from the attack, Felunge had no chance to dodge the incoming Electric attack, and the poor feline took the electric blast head on. Felunge meowed in pain, and once the attack ceased, she fell to the ground facefirst.

"Felunge!" Maria cried.

The referee raised a flag in Ash's direction. "Felunge can't fight anymore! The winner is Pikachu!"

Maria let out a sigh of defeat, and returned her fallen cat. "Good job, Felunge. Take a rest."

"YES!" Ash said, pumping a fist. "One down, two more to go!"

"Pikapi!" Pikachu cheered as well.

...

"Yes! Pikachu won!" Bonnie cheered.

"It shows that this match isn't going to be a repeat of last time," Clemont said with a nod.

"Indeed. Let's see if he can keep it up," Serena said, also feeling more hope for Ash's chances. "Though, how is that the second time Ash used Iron Tail against Felunge, it managed to overpower Kinetmunk's Shadow Claw? You'd think the result would be the same."

"My guess would be Iron Tail's additional effect, a chance to weaken the target's defense," Clemont explained. "Ash must have noticed that the effect was triggered, while Maria did not. Hence why Ash made Pikachu use the same move again, since he knew he'd overpower Felunge."

Bonnie couldn't help but smirk. "Guess that doing the same thing multiple times can yield different results after all."

...

"Kinetmunk, go!" Maria said, sending her second Pokemon.

"Kin!" the Normal and Electric-type happily cried after being released from its pokeball.

"Pikachu, return!" Ash ordered. Pikachu looked a little surprised, but complied anyway. Once he was besides his trainer, he tilted his head at him.

"Pika?"

"Don't worry, you were doing fine, but I want to save you for later," Ash explained, as his hand reached for one of his pokeballs.

"Aw, you're returning Pikachu?" Maria asked, placing her hands on her hips. "And here I thought you wanted to know which one of our electric rodents was the better one."

"Perhaps *you* need an answer to that question," Ash replied, perhaps a little snappier than he intended. "Now, time to put our newest team member to test! Dunsparce, I choose you!"

Dunsparce was released from his pokeball, landing on the ground with a soft 'thud'. He looked far calmer than he was in either Passage Cave or during the training the previous day. "Paaarce..."

"Dunsparce versus Kinetmunk, begin!" the referee said.

"Oh, a Dunsparce. You are bringing something new after all. Did you find it in Passage Cave, I guess?" Maria asked. "Well, let's see how much of a help this Dunsparce will be to you, Ash! Kinetmunk, use Super Fang!"

"Munk!" Kinetmunk cried, as it dashed towards Dunsparce, its buckteeth glowing white as they tripled in length.

"Alright, Dunsparce, counter that with-"

"Dun! Dun! Dunspaaaaaaarce..!" Dunsparce cried as he curled into a ball, his body shaking with fear.

"Dunsparce, no! We talked about this!" Ash shouted, frustrated.

"Munk?" Kinetmunk stopped, cancelled its attack, and looked at Maria, clearly not feeling comfortable fighting a Pokemon that wasn't going to defend himself.

"It seems that Dunsparce doesn't feel very comfortable fighting, Ash," Maria chastised, shaking her head.

"No, it's not that! Dunsparce-" Ash tried to explain, but Maria raised a finger to silence him.

"A trainer as experienced as you should know better than sending such a Pokemon against a Gym Leader. Kinetmunk, keep fight-"

"PARCE!"

While Kinetmunk had its back turned, Dunsparce hit it with a powerful Headbutt, sending the Chipmunk Pokemon crashing against the ground facefirst. Of course, a mere hit, even one from

behind, wasn't enough to knock the Normal and Electric type out, who quickly jumped back on all fours, and looked at Dunsparce with incredulous eyes.

Maria was also stared at Dunsparce, dumbfounded. "Okay that... was pretty cheap."

"Sorry! We've been trying to work on that tendency of his..." Ash apologized somewhat bashfully.

"Eh, no need to apologize. Even if it was a cheap shot, it wasn't illegal. Or else the referee would have said something," Maria reassured Ash. "Though, don't think we're going to fall for that trick a second time."

"Don't worry, I'm sure Dunsparce won't do it again. Right, Dunsparce?" Ash asked.

"Parce..." Dunsparce spat, rolling his eyes.

"Pika!" Pikachu cried indignantly, seemingly insulted by that Dunsparce said.

"Let's continue the battle. Kinetmunk, Super Fang again!" Maria ordered.

Once again, Kinetmunk, who understandably looked rather pissed, charged at Dunsparce, its buckteeth once again glowing and enlarged.

"Dunsparce, counter that with Rollout!" Ash said.

Dunsparce curled into a ball, and rolled at great speed towards the incoming Kinetmunk. The two Pokemon clashed, with Kinetmunk trying to sink its empowered buckteeth into the Land Snake Pokemon, but Dunsparce spinning speed was too high for that, and eventually the Chipmunk Pokemon was overpowered and hurled backwards.

"Yes!" Ash cheered. "See Dunsparce? You don't need to fight dirty to show your strength! Now, Rollout again!"

Dunsparce continued rolling, building even more speed as he moved to steamroll Kinetmunk with an attack twice as powerful as before.

"If contact moves won't work, ranged attacks will have to do. Kinetmunk, use Discharge!" Maria ordered.

"Kinet... MUNK!" Kinetmunk's body crackled with electricity, before it launched multiple streams of lightning towards the incoming Dunsparce.

The attack connected, and Dunsparce's Rollout was cancelled as he was electrocuted.

"Paaaaaarce!" he cried.

"Ignore his cries! Quick Attack!" Maria said.

Not willing to let the Land Snake Pokemon any time to breathe, Kinetmunk dashed towards Dunsparce at such speed it almost looked like a yellow and blue blur. Dunsparce didn't have time to avoid the attack, and the slam pushed him backwards.

"Dunsparce, hold on!" Ash shouted.

"Kinetmunk, follow up with Spark!" Maria ordered.

Kinetmunk's body was surrounded by an electric aura, and dashed towards Dunsparce once again.

"Dunsparce, dodge it with Dig!" Ash said.

Dunsparce quickly burrowed underground just as Kinetmunk was about to hit him, but passed above him instead. Once the Chipmunk Pokemon stopped, Dunsparce emerged from underground, hitting its underbelly.

" *Good thing he didn't think of attacking Maria.*" Ash thought in relief.

"Kinetmunk, Super fang, now!" Maria ordered.

As it was taking Dunsparce's hit, Kinetmunk's buckteeth tripled in length as they glowed with a white light, and were sunk into Dunsparce's body. The Land Snake Pokemon cried in agony.

"Dunsparce, no!"

"Hold on and don't let go, no matter how much he begs!" Maria instructed. "Prepare a Discharge!"

That moment, Ash realized that there was one attack of Dunsparce that Ash didn't tell him to use just yet, one that would work great in the current situation. "Dunsparce, Poison Jab!"

As Kinetmunk's body began to crackle with electricity, Dunsparce's drill tail was covered by a purple aura, before jabbing it into Kinetmunk's gut. Kinetmunk's eyes opened wide, releasing Dunsparce and stumbling backwards. The Chipmunk Pokemon's face turned of s sickly pale color, and coughed what appeared to be purple bubbles.

"No!" Maria cried, covering her mouth with her hands.

"Kinetmunk was poisoned? Yes!" Ash cheered, basking on his good luck. "Come on Dunsparce, use Rollout!"

Once again, Dunsparce rolled into a ball and dashed towards the poisoned Kinetmunk.

"Kinetmunk, stop it with Discharge!" Maria said.

"Dunsparce, swivel to the sides to dodge!" Ash commanded.

Once again, Kinetmunk fired multiple electric bolts at the incoming Dunsparce, but the Land Snake Pokemon moved to the sides in order to avoid them, until Dunsparce's spinning body slammed

against Kinetmunk, sending him tumbling backwards. Still, Kinetmunk appeared to have some fight in it, given that it was trying to stay on its feet, even if its legs were shaking badly. The Chipmunk Pokemon coughed more purple bubbles, before it finally collapsed on the ground.

The referee raised a flag in Ash's direction. "Kinetmunk can't fight anymore! The winner is Dunsparce!"

...

"Yes, yes, yes!" Bonnie cheered, bouncing on her seat. It was quite the contrast compared to the schoolchildren, who were obviously not cheering, but murmuring in disappointment that their teacher was losing so badly. "That's two of Maria's Pokemon that go down! One more and Ash will win!"

"Ash was surely lucky that that Poison Jab poisoned Kinetmunk," Serena said. "I know it has a chance to cause poisoning, but said chance isn't too big."

"I think it has to do with Dunsparce's ability, Serene Grace," Clemont explained. "Which increases the chance of attacks causing additional effects. Remember how Dunsparce also poisoned Birbie when they battled each other? I have the feeling Ash realized Dunsparce had such an ability."

"Serene Grace? *That's* the name of an ability?" Serena asked, raising an eyebrow.

"What's wrong with it?" Clemont asked.

"Well, aside from the fact that 'serene' is a letter away from my name, my mom's name is Grace," Serena reminded Clemont and Bonnie.

"Haha, I haven't realized of that!" Bonnie laughed. "Maybe your mom named you after that ability?"

"Now that's a conversation I'll be forward to have," Serena deadpanned, before her eyes returned to the battle. "That Dunsparce might have an attitude problem, but Ash caught himself quite the strong Pokemon," Serena commented.

"Well, at least he isn't disobeying Ash," Bonnie pointed out.

"No, he won't. While I saw Ash training Dunsparce yesterday, I could see that Dunsparce had a flippant attitude and poor sense of teamwork, but he also has a begrudging sense of respect for Ash," Serena began. "Dunsparce is the kind of prideful Pokemon that only respects strength, and Ash has that in abundance. Hopefully, Ash will make him understand that strength isn't all that there's to it."

...

"Kiricorn, go!" Maria said, tossing her last pokeball.

As Kiricorn was released from the capture device, it reared once again while letting out a powerful neigh.

"Dunsparce versus Kiricorn, go!" the referee said.

"Dunsparce, Rollout!" Ash ordered.

Once again, Dunsparce curled into a ball and rolled towards the white and pink Pokemon.

"Counter it with Mega Horn!" Maria said.

Kiricorn's antler-like horn began to glow with a greenish-yellow aura in the shape of a spike, and the moment Dunsparce was close enough, Kiricorn gored Dunsparce, launching him into the air, before it landed on the ground with a painful thud.

"Dunsparce!" Ash cried.

"Now, follow with Moonblast!" Maria said.

"Rollout again!" Ash said.

As Kiricorn summoned a sphere of pink and white swirling light above its head, Dunsparce once again rolled against his foe. Kiricorn then fired the attack.

"Swerve to the left!" Ash ordered.

Dunsparce did as Ash said, and managed to avoid the attack, if barely, as it exploded behind him, leaving a cloud of pink and white dust sparkled, before he finally slammed against Kiricorn, who neighed in Pain.

"Double Kick!" Maria ordered.

Before Dunsparce could attack again, Kiricorn delivered a powerful kick with its hard hooves, pushing Dunsparce backwards.

"Follow with Flamethrower!" Maria commanded.

"Avoid it with Dig!" Ash replied.

Kiricorn gathered flames inside its mouth, before releasing them in the form of a blazing stream. Dunsparce quickly burrowed underground, just as the burning torrent passed above him, safely avoiding the attack.

"That was a pretty big mistake, Ash," Maria said, smirking confidently. "Kircorn, Earthquake!"

"No!"

Kiricorn reared as the hooves of its front legs began to glow with a white light, before he brought said legs down. The moment the hooves touched the ground, they sent powerful seismic waves through the earth, causing the whole battleground to quake, twist and break apart. Multiple fissures were formed, as Dunsparce was blasted away from underground, falling on his back.

Dunsparce didn't made any attempt at getting back to his proverbial feet.

The referee raised a flag in Maria's direction. "Dunsparce can't continue the battle! Kiricorn is the winner!"

The announcement was followed by the crowd of children cheering for Maria, as Ash returned Dunsparce to his pokeball and whispered a few words of gratitude. Ash then looked at Pikachu.

"Ready to go, buddy?" Ash asked.

"Pikapi!" Pikachu replied, eager to battle again, and quickly dashed towards the battleground.

"Pikachu versus Kiricorn, begin!" the referee said.

"Pikachu, start with Thunderbolt!" Ash ordered.

"Counter it with Flamethrower!" Maria replied.

Pikachu jumped into the air, his body glowing yellow with electricity, as Kiricorn's mouth overflowed with flames, before the two Pokemon released their attacks. Lightning bolt and stream of flames met in the middle, producing a loud explosion.

"Don't let Pikachu time to breathe! Moonblast! Rapid Fire!" Maria ordered.

"Dodge them with Quick Attack!" Ash said.

Kiricorn summoned and fired Moonblasts as fast as it was able to, while Pikachu dashed across the battleground in a zigzagging pattern, dodging all the pink and white projectiles that ended up exploding beneath him, until he was close enough to the Unicorn Pokemon.

"Use Double Kick!" Maria ordered.

"Jump and use Iron Tail!" Ash said.

Pikachu jumped in time to avoid being crushed by Kiricorn's hard hooves, just as his tail began to glow with a metallic sheen. The moment Pikachu was eye to eye with the equine Pokemon, he slammed his hardened tail into Kiricorn's forehead. The equine whined in pain caused by the supereffective attack as it stumbled backwards.

"Yes! Direct hit!" Ash cheered. "Now use Thunderbolt!"

"Earthquake!" Maria shouted.

As Pikachu prepared his strongest attack, Kiricorn slammed its front hooves into the ground, causing against another earthquake. The ground twist and shifted violently under Pikachu's feet, and the electric mouse was blasted away by the seismic shockwaves.

"Pikachu, no!" Ash cried, seeing his starter Pokemon landing on the ground. Pikachu tried to get back to his feet, but the Ground-type attack had made a number on his body, and collapsed.

The judge raised a flag in Maria's direction. "Pikachu can't fight anymore! The winner is Kiricorn!"

Once again, the announcement was met by a roar of cheers from Maria's schoolchildren. Ash walked towards Pikachu, and carried it back to his side of the battleground.

"Don't worry buddy, you did great," Ash reassured his fallen Pokemon, before gently setting him on the floor next to him. Ash looked at Kiricorn before he reached for his final pokeball. "Thanks to Pikachu and Dunsparce, Kiricorn should have been softened enough to make the final fight easier. It all depends on you now. Greninja, I choose you!"

...

"Man, that Kiricorn is sure something," Serena said, feeling worried for Ash, but unable to suppress a sense of admiration for the strong and beautiful equine Pokemon. "It alone managed to neglect Ash's advantage."

"Yes, but this isn't like the other time. Even if they lost the same number of Pokemon, Ash still has the advantage," Clemont replied. "If he's careful and plays his cards well, he can win this."

"And thus it comes down again to Greninja versus Kiricorn," Serena's attention was drawn to Maria, who began to speak. "The last time, your Greninja was tired and afflicted by paralysis, while now it's completely fresh, while my poor Kiricorn has expended quite a lot of energy taking down your other two Pokemon."

Despite the summary of the situation, Serena didn't feel that Maria was too worried. If anything, she sounded... almost excited?

"I already told you that this match wouldn't be a repeat of the last time," Ash confidently said.

Maria's confident smirk not only matched Ash's, it surpassed it. "Oh, you have no idea of how right you are, Ash," Maria said, as she moved a lock of black hair back, revealing one of her ears, and most importantly, an earring she was wearing. She took it off and showed it to Ash. "You come from Kalos, Ash, so you should know what is this, right?"

The Kalosian teens (and one Kalosian kid) gasped. Maria was holding a multicolored, marble-sized orb with a symbol that looked like a DNA helix.

"That's a Keystone!" Bonnie loudly pointed out.

"Can... can Kiricorn Mega Evolve?" Serena asked in shock.

"You see, Mega Evolution is also pretty big in Tandor, Ash. Though, I'm not able to use it as often as I'd wish, because most of my

challengers aren't that experienced, so it would be a little overkill," Maria began, shaking her head and looking down. She then raised her head, and beamed at the Pallet Town teen. "But you Ash... you are the kind of challenger that I love the most. The one that pushes me and my Pokemon to our limits. The one that allows us to go all out! I was a bit disappointed with the way our first match ended, but Aotius and Mutios blessed me with this wonderful second chance. Now Kiricorn, unleash your true power! Mega Evolve!"

As Maria's Keystone shone brightly, Kiricorn's Mega Stone, on a clip hidden beneath its mane, began to glow as well. Both Keystone and Mega Stone shot beams of energy towards each other. The beams clashed, merging into one, and as the link between trainer and Pokemon was forged, Kiricorn began to glow and change its shape.

"Oh my goodness..." Serena said, almost blushing, while covering her mouth with her hands. "It's so..."

"CUUUUUUUUUUTEEEEEEEEEEE!" Bonnie almost screamed.

If Kiricorn was beautiful then, its beauty had now reached an otherworldly level. Its mane had grown in length, now covering almost its entire body, falling to its sides like the coat of a king. Its bushy pink tail had grown as well, now extending to the ground. Its antler-like blue horn had split into three, while its side horns had grown considerably longer. Blue tufts of hair surrounded its hooves, looking like small boots. Lastly, three rhomboid blue crystals floated at each side of its body, almost looking like wings.

Besotted by such majestic Pokemon, Serena just couldn't take her eyes away from Kiricorn.

...

While Ash wasn't expecting Maria to have such a trump card hidden, he wasn't taken aback either. Kiricorn could Mega Evolve, so what? Ash had already fought and defeated many Mega Evolved Pokemon before, and he would do it again. As many times as were necessary.

"Alright Greninja, time to go all out!" Ash said, throwing a fist forward.
"Let's do it, together!"

"GRE!" Greninja shouted, crossing his arms in front of his face as a spiraling tower of water formed around him. As trainer and Pokemon synchornized their minds and spirits, Greninja began to transform as well. The water then began to recede, condensing in the shape of a shuriken on Greninja's back, revealing the Kalosian water type's empowered form.

"Greninja versus Kiricorn! Begin!" the referee said.

"When I saw that Greninja of yours on TV, I never imagined I'd have the chance to battle him myself," Maria said, sounding almost giddy.
"Come on Kiricorn, let's give it our all! Moonblast!"

"Parry with Night Slash!"

As Kiricorn summoned an orb of pink and white swirling energy, noticeably larger than the ones it created before Mega Evolving, a pair of swords made of dark energy formed on Greninja's hands. The Moonsblast was fired, and Greninja dashed forward, spinning into a tornado just as the Fairy-type attack was about to hit, and slashing it, causing it to burst like a balloon into thousands of tiny sparkling bits.

"Now Greninja, Aerial Ace!" Ash emphatically ordered.

Greninja vanished, and the next second he reappeared in front of the startled Kiricorn, his arms and legs glowing white, before delivering a brutal swipe to the Unicorn Pokemon's face. Greninja then vanished and reappeared at different positions around Kiricorn, continuing his assault with more swipes and kicks, causing the Mega Evolved Pokemon to whine and stumble backwards.

"Defend yourself! Use Double Kick!" Maria shouted.

Overcoming the surprise of the attack, Kiricorn reared once again and tried to block and kick Greninja's frontal attacks back with its

front hooves. Horse and frog traded blows, until Kiricorn was able to land a kick on Greninja's chest, pushing the Ninja Pokemon backwards, making him wince in pain.

"ARGH!" Ash growled, as he clutched his chest with one hand.

"Ash? Are you okay?" Maria asked, a little concerned.

"Yes! It's a Battle Bond thing, but pay it no mind! Keep fighting!" Ash insisted, fighting off the pain.

"If you say so, we'll keep fighting without holding back! Flamethrower!" Maria ordered.

"Dodge it!"

Kiricorn took a deep breath, and exhaled a massive stream of flames from its mouth. Greninja moved backwards by doing several backflips, before jumping backwards into the air, letting the blazing torrent pass over him.

"Now, strike him with Megahorn!" Maria ordered.

"Double Team!"

A spike-shaped yellowish-green aura formed around Kiricorn's central horn, before the Unicorn Pokemon charged towards Greninja, who was about to land. The moment he touched ground, however, he filled the battleground with fake duplicates of himself, causing Kiricorn to stop on its tracks and cancel the attack.

"Remove those duplicates with Earthquake!" Maria ordered.

Once again, Kiricorn reared, and brought down its front hooves to the ground with great force, producing a shockwave so powerful it shattered the battleground even further, sending large chunks of rock and dirt into the air, dispelling all the copies and blasting Greninja into the air.

"Now that he can't dodge, use Moonblast!" Maria ordered.

"Greninja, use those rocks in the air as stepping stones!" Ash shouted.

"Gren!" Greninja agreed, and as soon as he regained his footing, he started to jump from one rock to another, dodging Kiricorn's Moonblasts.

"Get close and use Night Slash!" Ash commanded.

"Fry him with Flamethrower!" Maria shouted.

Jumping from one of the airborne rocks, Greninja nosedived towards Kiricorn as he summoned a purple glowing swords on each hand, who once again took a deep breath and exhaled a cone of roaring flames. Then, much to Maria's surprise, Greninja delivered a vertical slash, splitting the sea of flames in two, giving the Ninja Pokemon a direct path towards Kiricorn, striking the Unicorn Pokemon with the other sword the moment he was in close combat, the swing carrying so much force that Kiricorn was launched backwards.

"Night Slash one more time!" Ash ordered.

"Parry it with Megahorn!" Maria countered.

Two more swords formed on Greninja's hands, and the Water and Dark-type Pokemon dashed towards his Mega Evolved foe, as Kiricorn's middle horn was surrounded by a spike-shaped aura. This time, Kiricorn was able to parry Greninja, and the two Pokemon engaged in a surreal fencing duel, trading blows, thrusts and parries.

"Greninja, Aerial Ace!" Ash ordered.

"Kircorn, use Double Kick with your back legs!" Maria ordered.

That moment, Greninja's dark swords disappeared as his hands and legs glowed white, before vanishing and reappearing behind Kiricorn. Fortunately, thanks to Maria's warning, Kiricorn managed to

deliver a double kick on Greninja's chest, sending the Ninja Pokemon Tumbling backwards.

"Press on, Kiricorn! Moonblast!" Maria ordered.

"Greninja, Water Shuriken!" Ash said, already savoring victory.

As Kiricorn created another swirly orb of pink and white light, Greninja jumped into the air as he grabbed the water shuriken attached to his back, and raised it above his head, tripling in size, before tossing it at his foe.

Both attacks met in the middle, but unlike the previous time, they didn't cancel each other, resulting in an explosion. The enhanced Water Shuriken broke through the Moonblast, shattering it into thousand of sparkly bits, before it continued its way towards Kiricorn. The gigantic watery star found its mark, exploding into a torrent of roaring water that drowned the Normal and Fairy type Pokemon.

"Kircorn!" Maria cried.

The torrent of water finally calmed and dispersed into a large puddle, revealing Kiricorn, no longer in its Mega Evolved form, lying sideways on the ground, completely unconscious.

The referee raised a flag in Ash's direction. "Kircorn is unable to battle, Greninja is the winner! And since Maria has no more Pokemon, the winner of this match is Ash Ketchum!"

"Yes!" Ash said, pumping a fist into the air. "We did it, Greninja!"

Greninja turned around, the Battle Bond coming to an end, returning Greninja to his normal form. "Gre," Greninja nodded.

"Ash!"

Ash turned around, and saw Serena, Clemont and Bonnie running towards him.

"Ash, you did it! You beat Maria!" Serena almost squealed, beaming proudly at him.

"Greninja was so awesome!" Bonnie cheered.

"Indeed. Both you and your Pokemon remain as sharp as you were in Kalos," Clemont complimented.

...

Meanwhile, Maria sighed, and recalled her defeated Kiricorn. "Good job, Kiricorn. It was a great battle," she said, before walking towards Ash. "I may have lost, but I'm happy. Happy to be part of such an amazing battle."

"Hehe, thanks!" Ash chuckled, as he rubbed the back of his head. "You were such a tough opponent! If other Gym Leaders are just as strong as you are... boy I can't wait to fight them!"

"I'm sure you'll find them challenging enough," Maria said, as she began to dig for something on her pocket, before pulling it out. "Anyway, I guess I should give you this. The Normal Badge is yours. Congratulations."

Ash took the badge from Maria's hands. It was rather simple in design, a square with a diagonal cut, the left half yellow and the right half pink, surrounded by a silver frame.

"I got the Normal Badge!" Ash excitedly shouted, rising the badge for all to see.

"Pi-pika!" Pikachu cheered.

Ash then took out his badge case, and placed his first badge inside it. Seeing that the case was no longer empty filled Ash with encouragement.

"One down, seven more to go," he said, before closing the case.

"So, Ash, what do you plan to do now?" Maria asked. "Do you have your next destination in mind?"

"Uh..." Ash scratched his cheek. "Well, not really, hehe. Guys, do you know where are we going next?"

"The closest town that will hold a contest in the near future is Moki Town, so I think we should go there," Serena suggested. "Though, Moki Town doesn't have a Gym..."

"That can't be helped. Once you're done with the contest, travel east through the Seabreeze Way, and you'll reach Burole Town," Maria explained. "There's a Pokemon Gym there that you can challenge."

"Alright then! First Stop, Moki Town, and then, Burole Town!" Ash said, recovering his earlier excitement.

Maria escorted the group to the Gym's exit, and watched them go. They waved her goodbye, until they finally disappeared into the distance. The Normal type specialist couldn't help but smile.

"I have the feeling this year's Pokemon League is going to be unforgettable," she said.

Maria had no idea how right those words would prove to be.

...

As Ash and their friends exited Nowtoch City, they were being followed from a distance by somebody: the same blond biker woman who had spied on them in Kevlar Town. Once they saw them heading towards Owten Nook, she took her Pokegear and dialed a number.

"Richard? It's Amber again," Amber replied. "Yes, the kids have left Nowtoch City and are heading back to Kevlar... no, they don't appear to suspect anything. Shouldn't we...? Alright... okay, I'll continue trailing them. I'll call you soon."

As the call ended, the woman got back on her bike, and continued following the group of teens.

Author's Notes: So many things happened on this chapter, huh? Apart from Ash digesting his previous defeat and then winning his rematch against Maria, earning his first badge, he also caught his second Tandorian Pokemon! Well, not exclusive to Tandor, but you know what I mean.

If Birbie was this precious, wide eyed boi that needs to be protected, Dunsparce is... an asshole, plain and simple. Well, not as plain as simple, there's more to the Land Snake Pokemon than meets the eye. Without spoiling much, let's say that his backstory and how it led him to develop his current personality are a mirror to Birbie's. Though, before anybody raises the question, no, as bad as he is, Dunsparce isn't going to disobey Ash in battle, though that doesn't mean he won't cause him a few headaches here and there.

Speaking of Dunsparce, the Dunsparce Gang is still tracking Ash and his friends' moves and actions. They will finally make their proper debut the very next chapter. Though I'm sure that whatever they do, Ash and co. shouldn't worry too much about them :D

Ash had won his first badge, but things won't get any calmer in the near future, as an epic clash approaches. In the meantime, don't forget to drop review. Seriously guys, it takes no effort and you have no idea how happy they make me.

Clash with the Pokemon Traffickers

Chapter 9:

Clash with the Pokemon Traffickers

Owten Nook

Thankfully, by the time the group left Nowtoch City, the rocks blocking Owten Nook had been finally removed and people could use the route again without having to cross Passage Cave. Though, thankfully, it seemed that the Pokemon inside the cave had remained calm and no more rock slides happened as a result of their constant territorial disputes.

They had spent the whole previous day walking, stopping only a couple times to eat and or to rest, before they set up the tents for the night. Then, as soon as the sun was up, they decided to continue their travel, until it was noon, and decided it was time to rest and fill their stomach, as breakfast felt far away and wouldn't be able to sustain them for much longer, so after finding a spot next to a small forest, they set up their camp.

Naturally, the first thing they did after setting camp was to release their Pokemon from their pokeballs so they could spread their legs and breathe some fresh air before it was time to eat.

As they waited for lunch hour, Ash had suggested that he and Serena had a sparring match to work up their appetites, something he was saying so often it was on its way to become a catchphrase. Ash decided to use Dunsparce and Birbie, while Serena used Braixen and Selkid.

"Let's see what you think of this combination, Serena!" Ash boasted, before addressing his Pokemon. "Dunsparce, Rollout! Birbie, use Gust to help him build even more speed!"

Dunsparce curled into a ball and rolled forward, while Birbie flapped his wings in order to produce a gust of wind that pushed Dunsparce from behind.

Serena smirked confidently. "Let me answer that with a combination of my own! Selkid, use Hyper Voice! And Braixen, use Flamethrower on it!"

"SeeeeelKIIIIIIIIID!" Selkid screamed as her voice manifested in the form of sonic shockwaves that flew towards the coming Dunsparce.

Braixen then aimed her wand into the sonic waves and shoot a stream of flames into it. The moment the fire touched the soundwaves, it began to wriggle and shift, forming a spiraling cone of flames around the Hyper Voice. The combination attack blasted Dunsparce backwards, who uncoiled as it landed on the ground with a soft thud. Even if Dunsparce didn't suffer much damage -she deduced the spinning force helped the Land Snake Pokemon deflect most of the damage- he was stopped in his tracks.

"Very good, Serena!" Ash praised her. "That combo would have made me lose a lot of points."

Serena beamed with pride at Ash's compliments, the determination to become even better burning brighter than ever. "And just wait to see what else I have prepared! Selkid, use Sing!"

The Sea Nymph Pokemon intoned a song that could have easily been mistaken for a human voice. Ethereal musical notes started to appear around Ash's Pokemon as they grew drowsy.

"Guys, resist! You must-eh?"

Then, much to Ash and Serena's surprise, Birbie started to chirp the same melody Selkid was, trying to follow the Water and Fairy type's pace. More musical notes started to appear around them.

"Look at that. Birbie learned Sing by listening to Selkid," Ash pointed out.

"It seems he wanted to form a duet with her," Serena said, giggling. Could it be that Birbie felt something for Selkid?

Serena, however, noticed something about Selkid. While she was allowing Birbie to sing alongside her, she was looking at him as if the Eden Bird Pokemon was challenged her. Selkid continued her song, only increasing her range and her pace, with Birbie trying to keep up with her as best as he could. She couldn't help to feel a little bad for Ash's Pokemon, given that the little bird wasn't trying to compete with her.

"Parce!"

Unfortunately for the singers, their duet abruptly ended when Dunsparce chose that moment to Headbutt the unaware Selkid, sending her rolling on the ground, getting dirt and blades of grass all over her body.

"Selkid!" Serena cried, as she went after her.

"Braix!" Braixen cried as well, following her trainer.

"BIRB!" Birbie screeched.

"Dunsparce!" Ash shouted. "Why did you do that!?"

"Parce?" the Land Snake Pokemon asked defensively, as if reminding everybody else that they were still in the middle of a battle.

While Ash and Birbie admonished Dunsparce, Serena and Braixen helped Selkid back on her feet. Fortunately, Dunsparce's attack hadn't hurt her much, even if she was now dirty.

"Selkid, are you okay?" Serena asked.

"Sel..." Selkid said, as she tried to wipe the dirt and grass from her little body, before glaring at the unapologetic looking Dunsparce.

"That Dunsparce..." Serena shook her head. "Say, there's a small pond going in that direction. Braixen, why don't you take Selkid there so she can wash herself?"

"Braix," Braixen nodded, as she held Selkid's hand and escorted the Sea Nymph Pokemon to the aforementioned pond.

As her Pokemon left, Ash walked towards her, a guilty look on his face, unlike the unruly Land Snake Pokemon.

"Hehe, sorry for that," Ash began. "I thought that Dunsparce realized that he shouldn't attack, but guess he's still difficult-"

Serena raised a finger, silencing Ash. Though she shot him a gentle smile to reassure him that she wasn't mad. "It's okay, Ash. I know it wasn't your fault. Then again, it may be for the best if you don't use Dunsparce during our spars until you have the time to curb his... attitude problem."

Ash smiled at her, still guilty but relieved to see Serena wasn't mad at him. "Guess I can't argue with that."

"Come on, let's-"

Serena was interrupted by a rustle coming from nearby bushes, as she and Ash turned around towards the source of the disturbance. And from the shrubbery, a small Pokemon emerged. It was a cute equine Pokemon, with white skin, a pink mane, a long tail ended in a pink fluff, a horn in the middle of its forehead, and big, blue eyes.

Serena's heart skipped a beat when she saw that Pokemon, who resembled a smaller version of Kiricorn. Both she and Ash pulled out their Pokedex.

"Minicorn, the Foal Pokemon. Normal/Fairy. Its small stature, gentle demeanor and delicate features make it beloved by young children. A popular line of toys is based on it."

Checking Kiricorn's entry after that one, Serena confirmed that yes, Minicorn evolved into Kircorn when exposed to a Shiny Stone. Serena couldn't believe her luck, running into a Minicorn so soon, given their rarity.

Minicorn let out a high pitched whine, alerted by the sound the Pokedex made, and snapped her head towards the humans, looking at them with apprehensive eyes.

"Uh oh, she looks scared," Ash whispered to her.

"I know. I'll try not to come off as menacing," Serena whispered back, before clearing her throat and putting on her best, most reassuring smile. "Hi there, Minicorn! My name is Serena, and I wondered if you'd like to be my fri-"

Serena was interrupted when Minicorn let out a loud, high pitched neigh of terror, before dashing back into the small forest.

"Minicorn, wait!" Serena said, taking a couple steps in the direction Minicorn ran towards. "I don't want to hurt you, I promise!"

"Guess that's a shy one," Ash commented. "Or maybe it's a Minicorn thing. Well, no wonder they're so hard to catch if they don't get close to humans."

"Too bad. I would have liked to befriend her," Serena dejectedly said, and she and Ash walked to Clemont and Bonnie, in the process of setting up the table.

Just as they finished, Braixen and Selkid returned, the latter already cleaned from all the dirt on her body, which still gleamed from the dripping water.

"Hey, look who's back!" Serena smiled at her most recent Pokemon. "Are you feeling better now? Because your food is ready!"

Selkid looked at the other Pokemon, both those who belonged to Serena, and those who don't, already happily munching on their food. Birbie noticed her, and waved a wing at her, but she ignored him. She furrowed her brow when her eyes rested on Dunsparce, the Land Snake Pokemon gobbling down his food as if nothing had happened.

"Selkid?" Serena asked.

Wordlessly, Selkid grabbed her bowl of food, and carried it to the other side of the table, away from the other Pokemon.

"Guess she isn't feeling that good yet..." Serena dejectedly said.

"Braixen," Braixen said, resting a paw on Serena's back to comfort her. The Fox Pokemon then grabbed her own bowl, and went to eat with Selkid. Thankfully, the Sea Nymph Pokemon didn't mind Braixen's company. The two Pokemon silently ate together.

...

Unbeknownst to the humans, Minicorn hadn't gone too far. In fact, she was still at the edge of the forest, carefully watching those humans returning with the rest of their herd, which also included a bunch of other Pokemon.

Normally, Minicorn wouldn't have left the safety and protection that the forest provided, especially since those other humans were still looking for her and her friends. One of the reasons she decided to go in the open was because she heard a voice, a singing voice, one that she hadn't heard in quite a few weeks.

But alas, she wasn't there, instead only a couple humans that could have easily captured her if they were faster. Granted, they didn't look

as dangerous as the humans that kept her and her friends prisoner, but she didn't dare to push her luck with them.

Coming to terms with the fact that her missing friend wasn't there, Minicorn was about to leave, but something else caught her attention: a heavenly smell of something delicious. Something not of this world. Something that made her mouth water and stomach growl. Finding food has been a constant problem since she and her friends escaped captivity, so the promise of food was a welcome one.

One problem: the smell came from the human encampment, meaning that the food was theirs, and their Pokemon's.

Oh well, there's no reward without risk. And her friends were counting on her.

...

And now, it was one of Dunsparce's favorite time since he allowed that human to catch him: lunch time.

Initially, Dunsparce only traveled with Ash because he thought that doing so would allow him to become stronger. The free food, however, was an unexpected but very welcomed surprise. And the taste was so much better. No more digging and scrapping to find stale mushrooms to eat, for the Land Snake Pokemon had hit the jackpot.

Though, he would have enjoyed his food much more if he couldn't feel Birbie's glare burning through his skin. Was he still angry because he attacked that fish in the middle of their singing? It wasn't Dunsparce's fault if the two of them forgot they were in the middle of a fight. Hell, Selkid should be grateful for Dunsparce holding back. A Poison Jab would have been far worse than a mere Headbutt.

Maybe he should have attacked Birbie instead, and teach that naïve chick what happens when you lower your guard in the middle of

battle. Birbie was young and full of energy, traits of somebody who had an easy life and never experienced any hardships. How Ash allowed such a weakling among his ranks, Dunsparce couldn't tell.

Of course, Dunsparce was forgetting, either deliberately or otherwise, that said weakling had beaten him not long after that, but Dunsparce surely didn't consider that relevant to the topic at hand.

"Ches? Chespin? Chespin!"

"Cham! Pancham!"

"CHESPIN!"

Dunsparce's peace was disturbed further when he saw the Chespin from the nerdy human, Clemont, getting into an argument with the Pancham of the corny human. Apparently, Chespin was accusing Pancham of stealing some of the sweets the corny human, Serena, had baked for them, with Pancham naturally denying it.

"Pi, Pika!"

Before the two of them could get into a fight, Pikachu offered Chespin one of his sweets -Dunsparce believed Serena called them "pokepuffs"- which seemed to calm the Grass type down.

Too bad, that argument looked entertaining. And it seemed those two didn't get along. A malicious smile spread across his face as Dunsparce thought in ways to sow discord between them so they could get back to fighting-

YOINK!

"Cham?" Pancham asked, as he noticed that the pokepuff at his side had disappeared. He immediately turned at Chespin, a paw curled into a fist. "Pancham!? Cham, pancham!"

"Ches?"

"PANCHAM!"

... turns out no action on Dunsparce's part was necessary, as something had stolen Pancham's pokepuff. He didn't know who was, he only saw a brief flash of white and pink, but he didn't care. This time, Pikachu was unable to deescalate the situation, as he had no more food of his own to use to placate either of them.

"LUXRAY!" the nerdy human's Luxray quickly got in the middle, keeping the two angry Pokemon apart from each other.

Party pooper.

"Syl? Sylveon!" Sylveon cried, nervously looking around

"Nene?" Dedenne asked.

Apparently, Sylveon's food had also disappeared when she wasn't looking, and so did Dedenne, and accused the other Pokemon of taking away their food. Whoever that thief was, it was good, and has Dunsparce's respect.

"Bir-"

Birbie tried to say something, but his plea was silenced as the situation snowballed into a loud argument, drowning his voice in a cacophony of yells, as Pikachu, Luxray, and later Greninja tried without much success to defuse the situation.

Maybe with some luck, the argument would result in violence.

"Hey, what's happening over there?" Ash asked.

"Why are you fighting?" the small human, Bonnie, asked.

All the Pokemon immediately turned towards their trainers and began to loudly accuse the others of stealing their food, while the humans did their best to calm them down.

...

The raid had been successful.

Minicorn happily trotted with her loot, which she carried on her mouth, horn, and wrapped around her tail. It wasn't much, but she guessed it would last her and her friends a couple days, if they were careful with the rations.

And the best part, no one had seen her, as the other Pokemon quickly blamed each other for the disappearance of the food. Then, they'll leave with their trainers and the whole incident will be forgotten.

Or that's what Minicorn thought, as she wasn't unaware that a certain bird was following her, making sure the Foal Pokemon didn't spot him.

...

It took them some time, but they finally managed to calm their Pokemon down. It seemed that their food had disappeared, which was the cause of the argument. They were unable to come up who was right and who wasn't. Blaming Chespin was tempting, given his history, but even the Spiny Nut Pokemon wasn't as big of a gluttonous jerk as to steal food from pretty much every other Pokemon.

After that, the humans told their Pokemon to finish what was left of their food while they finished theirs, and they would resume their journey.

"Guess it's a good thing Selkid decided to eat apart from them," Serena said, as she began to recall all her Pokemon into their respective pokeballs. "Being in the middle of such an argument was the last thing she needed."

"Though, it's kind of weird that our Pokemon got into a fight like that," Ash said, as he did the same.

"Yeah. Chespin might cause some trouble with food, but never to this scale," Clemont agreed. "Which made me believe that this time he wasn't the culprit of the food disappearance."

"Guess there's no point in mulling over it. We will have to keep a closer eye on our Pokemon so there's not a repeat of this," Ash said, as he was about to recall Birbie, but the Eden Bird Pokemon was nowhere to be seen. "Birbie? Birbie? Birbie, where are you?"

"Pikapi?" Pikachu asked, looking around for the blue bird, only noticing his absence now.

"Where did Birbie go?" Serena asked, looking around as well.

"Wait... what if... Birbie stole the food and then ran away? Well, flew away," Bonnie pondered.

"There's no way Birbie would do that. In fact, of all my Pokemon, he's the one who eats the least," Ash said. "Though, now that you mention it, I don't remember seeing Birbie as part of the-"

"Birb!" Birbie chirped, as he emerged from the forest, looking a little agitated.

"Oh, there he is!" Ash said, relieved. "Birbie, where did you go? We were going to leave and-"

"Bir, birbie! Bir, bir!" Birbie chirped loudly, before he turned around, and returned to the forest.

"Hey, Birbie, where are you going? Come back!" Ash shouted, a bit confused by the behavior of the normally calm and chipper bird.

"Ash... I think Birbie found something and wants us to follow him," Clemont deduced.

"The food thief?" Bonnie asked.

"Only one way to know," Ash said, as he entered the forest, following Birbie.

The group of four followed the Eden Bird Pokemon across the small forest, the latter flying at a slow pace so they could follow him properly. They sometimes had to push some bushes or overgrowths here and there apart to walk, but otherwise the trek wasn't a difficult one.

"Whoa," Bonnie said.

They eventually reached to their destination: a rather large tree with an underground grotto partially hidden under its roots.

"So... the thieves are under that tree?" Ash asked.

"Birb!" Birbie nodded.

"Very well. Thanks for your help, Birbie. Return," Ash said, as he recalled Birbie into his pokeball.

The group went into the underground grotto, with Clemont activating his Heliolisk Flashlight to illuminate the area. It didn't take long for them to find its inhabitants, as they heard a high pitched neigh.

"... Minicorn?" Serena asked.

In front of them, bathed in the artificial yellow light, were three Pokemon. One of them was Minicorn. The other was an Eevee, and the other was a blue and yellow insect Pokemon neither of them had seen in their lives, surrounding and eating from a pile of food the gang quickly realized was what their Pokemon were eating. Ash was quick to scan this new Pokemon with his Pokedex.

" Colarva, the Snow Mite Pokemon. Ice/Bug. The older they get, the sharper the ice spikes on their back become. Stepping on one buried under the snow is an unpleasant experience."

Eevee and Colarva flinched and shrunk in fear upon seeing their shelter breached by outsiders. Minicorn, instead, let out a neigh, and glared at the group, ready to go down fighting to protect her friends.

"Pikaaa!" Pikachu, in response, jumped from Ash's shoulder, landing on all fours, and releasing sparks of electricity from his cheeks. If these thieves wanted a fight, they'd have one.

"W-Wait! We don't want to fight you!" Serena said, raising her hands defensively. "If you only wanted food, all you have to-"

The honey blonde was interrupted when she felt one of her pokeballs shaking on its own, before opening and releasing the Pokemon inside.

"Selkid!" Selkid said, waving both arms at Minicorn.

Much to the group's bewilderment, Minicorn blinked in surprise, before relaxing her body. The two Pokemon walked towards each other, Minicorn nuzzling Selkid's face, while Selkid rubbed Minicorn's head with her arm. The Eevee and Colarva in the back also stopped shaking, and even got closer to meet Selkid, who also greeted them.

"Selkid? Do you know these Pokemon?" Serena asked.

"Selkid!" Selkid turned towards Serena and nodded at her.

"If that's true... then that means that these Pokemon must have been in the hands of those traffickers!" Clemont said in realization.

"Is that true, Selkid? Is that how you know these Pokemon?" Bonnie asked.

"Sel..." Selkid sadly agreed.

Ash's stare hardened. "We're close to Kevlar Town, where we rescued Selkid from that Maury kid. This confirms it. The traffickers' base of operations must be around Kevlar Town."

"Plus, we saw those bikers coming heading towards Kevlar after we left Moki Town," Clemont added.

"So... what are we going to do now?" Serena asked.

"First of all, these Pokemon look pretty beat up, not to mention hungry. Given that there are no Pokemon Centers around and we're still too far from Kevlar, we're going to take care of them ourselves until they're back to full health," Ash decided. His three friends nodded at the suggestion. "After that, we're going to find these traffickers' base and release all the Pokemon they have captured."

This earned Ash a few odd looks from his friends.

"Um, Ash, as much as I want to see those Pokemon free, shouldn't we contact the Rangers and let them take care of it?" Clemont suggested.

"By the time we reach Kevlar and contact them, it may be too late," Ash said, shaking his head. "In fact, I'm sure our encounter with Maury already tipped them that they're on thin ice and decided to bail already. Now that I think about it, it's possible that these three Pokemon took advantage of them moving out to escape."

"So if we find their base, they might not even be there," Serena summarized.

"Possibly, but we don't lose anything by taking a look first," Ash said. "If we don't find anything, we'll tell the Rangers once we return to Kevlar. Alright?"

To Ash's satisfaction, none of them opposed his suggestion.

"Very well then," Serena said, before turning at Selkid. "Selkid, ask your friends if they want to come with us for the time being. We can feed them and heal their wounds."

"Sel," Selkid nodded, before turning towards the trio of Pokemon, and presumably translated what Serena had told her.

The three Pokemon looked at each other, before sharing a couple of mutters. The three of them then turned towards the humans, and nodded.

...

A few minutes later, the group were back at their camp. Thankfully, it was still the way they left it. Leaving their tents, folding table and other belongings there unattended was foolish in hindsight, but fortunately, they weren't gone for long, so the camp was exactly as they left it.

The first thing they did was to give them some food, which they accepted eagerly, and wolfed them down as if somebody would take it away from them if they ate too slowly.

"Easy there, guys! You're going to choke on your food if you don't properly chew!" Bonnie told them.

"I guess these Pokemon haven't had much to eat lately," Clemont said, adjusting his glasses.

Once they were full, it was time to spray them with some Potions. Minicorn appeared to be the healthier of the three -perhaps that's why she was the one who went out to find food- but Eevee and Colarva, not so much. However, the Evolution Pokemon and the Snow Mite Pokemon took a step back the moment Clemont got close with the spray bottle, clearly not trusting him.

"Sel, selkid!" Selkid said, presumably telling them not to be afraid.

"This might sting a little at first, but trust me, you're going to feel so much better after that," Clemont reassured them, as he sprayed them with the Potion. The two Pokemon winced a little, but they trusted Selkid and let Clemont continue spraying them. However,

after a few seconds, Eevee and Colarva looked at their bodies in amazement, seeing how their wounds disappeared and the small but persistent aches that afflicted them disappeared, replaced by a feeling of relief like they've never felt before.

"Ev!" Eevee squaled.

"Co-co!" Colarva happily screeched.

"See? I told you guys you can trust us," Bonnie smiled at them.

"Nene!" Dedenne emphatically added.

"Alright, now that you guys are better," Ash began as he walked towards them. "So, I was wondering-"

"Pika!" Pikachu suddenly interrupting, his ears perking up.

"Pikachu?" Ash whispered.

Silence reigned for a moment as neither human nor Pokemon made any noise, as if expecting for something to happen.

Then, they heard it.

The engine of a motorbike in distance, growing fainter and fainter until it disappeared.

"The bikers..." Bonnie said.

"They're close by..." Serena added.

Ash, however, looked far from worried or intimidated. If anything, he looked even more resolute than ever. "Then we were right. They do have their hideout somewhere around this parts. And inside said lair must be all the Pokemon they've poached."

"The noise came from that direction," Clemont said, pointing to the west. "But said lair could be anywhere."

"Fortunately, we know some Pokemon who managed to escape from that place," Ash told the trio of wild Pokemon, his voice sounding more pleading rather than demanding. "Listen, you may not like this, given that you'll have very bad memories of such place, but... can you lead us to the place you escaped from?"

Predictably, the trio grew uncomfortable with such a question.

"I know that going back to such a place may not be easy for you," Ash continued, kneeling before them so he could look at them in the eye. "But... think in all the Pokemon that, like you not long ago, were in the hands of those criminals. They're suffering like you did. And they're waiting for somebody to rescue them. You can help them escape."

"Pi, pikachu!" Pikachu added, waving his paws.

"Selkid!" Selkid added as well.

Once again, the trio of Pokemon looked at each other, before trading some whispers, and thankfully, once again their response was a positive one.

"You will? Awesome!" Ash cheered.

"And don't worry. We promise you we won't let you those guys catch you again," Serena reassured them.

...

About an hour later, the trio of escaped Pokemon led their human saviors through the forest, coming out from the other side, and heading towards the west, towards the rocky hills that surrounded Owten Nook.

"Are you sure this is the right direction?" Clemont asked, as he looked around. "There doesn't seem to be anything here."

"Eev!" Eevee said, nodding.

"Well, it looks secluded enough to build a base, but the terrain here isn't the best to build anything," Serena commented.

"I'm with Clemont, I'm not seeing anything here," Bonnie said, looking around as well. Then, she grabbed Dedenne and lifted him above her head. "Do you see something, Dedenne?"

"Nene," the Antenna Pokemon shook his head.

The trio then stopped, making the whole group to stop as well. The path ahead branched in different directions, and they were looking at them in confusion, as if trying to remember which one was the one they took when they escaped. They spend there quite a few minutes, unable to reach a decision.

"Guess this is as far as we're going to get," Serena said, as she scratched the side of her head.

"I guess that they were worried with escaping and didn't take the time to memorize the place," Ash said. "Not that I can blame them."

"Well, if I was an evil guy, I wouldn't just want my base on a far away place, but also hidden so people don't find them on accident," Bonnie pointed out. "Maybe that's why they're having trouble remembering where it was."

"That's... a rather clever observation, Bonnie," Clemont admitted, making his sister smile proudly.

"It's also a problem. How are we going to find something that's hidden?" Serena asked.

"Don't worry, I have the best Pokemon for the job!" Clemont said, as his hand reached for one of his pokeballs. "Luxray, go!"

"Lux!" the Gleam Eyes Pokemon shouted as he was released from the capture device.

"Luxray, we're looking for a place that might be hidden somewhere around this area," Clemont explained. "Can you use your X-Ray vision to help us track it?"

"Luxray!" the Electric type nodded. Luxray's eyes started to glow as he activated his X-ray vision. He began to move around, looking in every possible direction, trying to find something that might not fit with the current rocky terrain. And after a few minutes, he finally did. "Lux!"

"Did you find something, Luxray?" Clemont asked.

Luxray then began to run in the direction of one of the rocky paths, with the rest of the group trailing after him. Eventually, they reached the end of the path, which was blocked by a pile of large rocks and boulders. Luxray, however, didn't stop, and continued running towards the seemingly blocked path, and much to their shock, Luxray walked through it as if it wasn't there.

"A holographic disguise!" Clemont said. "No wonder the Rangers had such a hard time finding their hideout."

"A good way to hide the way to your lair. Bonnie was right, this isn't something one would find unless you were looking for it," Ash said, as he and his friends walked through the hologram.

"Those bikers surely have access to advanced technology," Bonnie commented, impressed.

They continued walking through the path, who took multiple turns, while also becoming more and more like a slope.

"You know, for a bunch of bikers, those Dunsparce guys chose quite an odd place for a hideout," Serena said, as she kicked one of the many, many pebbles scattered around the rocky slope. "This isn't a good place to ride a motorbike. You'd need something like an all-terrain vehicle."

"Who says they don't have them?" Clemont asked. "Maybe they chose this place precisely because no one would think in looking for a bunch of bikers here."

The path began to widen little by little, until they finally reached a large cliff wall. And at the base of said cliff wall there was the entrance of a tunnel, blocked by a metallic double door.

"I have the feeling we just found the hideout," Ash said.

"Lux!" Luxray warned.

"I think Luxray agrees with you," Clemont said, noticing how Luxray was looking at the gate intently. Or more specifically, what was behind that gate.

"Come on, let's see if we can force that door open," Ash said.

As they walked towards the tunnel entrance, they realized that Minicorn, Eevee and Colarva hadn't moved from their spots, and were looking at the metal gate with fear in their eyes. The humans didn't need to ask to know what was going through the Pokemon trio's minds.

"It's okay, you don't have to come with us any further," Serena said in a soothing voice. "We can go on our own from this point onwards."

"Yes. Thanks a lot for guiding us to this place," Clemont added. "You were very brave doing so."

The three Pokemon nodded before they turned around and ran away, presumably back to the same forest where Ash and his friends found them.

"Goodbye Minicorn," Serena said in a whisper. "Let's hope you and your friends will find a good place to live."

"Alright, time to rescue the rest of Minicorn's friends," Ash said, pulling one of his pokeball buckled on his belt. "Greninja, I choose

you!"

Ash tossed the pokeball forward, releasing his strongest Pokemon so far. "Gre!"

"Greninja, use Night Slash on that gate!"

"Gre..." Greninja said, as he summoned a black and purple energy blade on his hand, before dashing forward and delivering several slashing motions. "... NINJA!"

While the door appeared to be pretty solid, it wasn't hard enough to resist Greninja's might, and the Ninja Pokemon's Night Slash was able to cut a hole big enough for all of them to pass.

"Alright, let's go!" Ash said before rushing inside, the rest of his friends and the Pokemon following behind.

...

Once again, the blond biker named Amber had also been trailing Ash and his friends while they searched for the hideout of the Pokemon traffickers. Given the extremely rocky terrain, she was forced to leave her motorbike and continue on foot, though that wasn't an obstacle for the woman to do her job.

Once she saw Ash's Greninja break the steel door open, allowing the group and his Pokemon inside, she opened her Pokegear and dialed the number of her boss.

"Richard? This is Amber. I don't know how but those kids managed to find the secret hideout," Amber said, her voice sounding panicked. "So you and the others better get your sorry butts here, because things are going to get ugly really fast!"

...

As Ash and his friends ran through the ample tunnel, they couldn't help but notice the metallic sheets covering the ground, walls and

roof, as well as the small lights to the sides and on the roof that kept it well illuminated, to realize that the traffickers had dug their base into the rocky hill rather than on top of it.

The walls were also marked with a large red Omega symbol, identical to the one on the Muscular Enhancer Maury's Pokemon wore.

The tunnel entrance led to what appeared to be a lobby. There were two men and a woman, wearing some sort of military uniform: a dark blue bodysuit with a gray metallic chestplate, gauntlets, boots, shoulderpads, belt and helmet, with more Omega symbols on them. The helmets had a green visor-like monocle that covered a single eye of their faces.

"Hey, who the hell are you and what are you doing here!?" one of the armored men asked.

"How did you enter here?" the woman demanded.

The helmet of the second man began to beep as information flashed on his visor. "Hey, that's the Selkid Maury lost many days ago!"

"So you're the Pokemon traffickers, huh?" Ash asked. "Well, to answer your question, we're the ones who are going to put an end to your operations!"

"Pika!" Pikachu said, jumping forward and landing on all fours, electric sparks jumping from his cheeks.

"Gren!" Greninja said, as he took a step forward, ready to attack as well.

"Big words for such a small kid!" the first man said, as he pulled out a pokeball. "We'll teach you not to meddle with Team Omega! Go Primeape!"

"Go Tofurang!" the second man said.

"Go Folerog!" the woman said.

"Team Omega, huh?" Ash asked. "You aren't the first group of criminals I faced that believed they could treat Pokemon the way they pleased. Greninja, Water Shuriken!"

"Gre!" Greninja said, as a pair of blue shuriken formed on his hands, and tossed them towards the enemy pokemon.

"Primeape, counter with Karate Chop!" the first grunt ordered.

"Use Poison Fang, Tofurang!" the female grunt ordered.

Primeape's fist glowed white, while a glowing purple aura surrounded Tofurang's mouth, as the two of them moved to counter Greninja's attack. However, the moment the two of them hit the water shuriken, they exploded into a mass of torrential water that pushed the Pokemon backwards, slamming them against the wall behind them.

"WHAT!?" the female grunt asked, shocked to see their Pokemon beaten so easily.

"Pikachu, Thunderbolt on Folerog!" Ash ordered.

"Pikaaaaa..." Pikachu jumped into the air, his body crackling with electricity. "CHUUUUUUUUU!"

Pikachu released a powerful lightning bolt towards the hapless Folerog, the super effective attack knocking out the Water and Poison type instantly.

The helmet on one of the male grunts beeped, as more information flashed on his visor. "What the hell? The power of those two Pokemon is off the charts! Just what's wrong with this kids!"

"Retreat!" the other male grunt said as the trio of criminals bolted for the nearest exit.

"Oh no, you won't! Luxray, don't let them escape!" Clemont ordered.

The Gleam Eyes Pokemon leaped above the criminals, landing in front of them and blocking their only exit, and growling at them menacingly. Yelping, they scrambled for another door, but this time it was Greninja, without needing Ash to tell him to, who jumped in front of the door, staring down at them, arms crossed.

"Selkid, Sing!" Serena ordered.

As Selkid began to sing, ethereal music notes began to float around the Team Omega grunts, the Sea Nymph Pokemon making sure her friends were unaffected by the effect of her attack. In a few seconds, they succumbed and collapsed on the ground, deeply asleep.

"Good job, you two," Ash praised Clemont and Serena. "Now these three won't alert the rest of their cronies about our presence here."

"While the battle was quick, I'm sure somebody must have heard the commotion and more of those thugs are coming to see what's wrong," Serena pointed out.

"In that case, we better find where are they keeping the captured Pokemon so we can release them as soon as possible," Ash said, looking around the lobby. There were three doors leading to three different hallways. "Though... this place looks pretty big. Even if we split, we might take a lot of time to search every corner..."

"I think this may be of help," Clemont said, as he walked towards one of the sleeping grunts, and removed his helmet. "I hope you don't mind if borrow this for a few moments," Clemont said, before removing his glasses and putting on the helmet. Using the buttons on the side of the helmet, Clemont began to test what the device could do. "This helmet has a built-in computer. It has many functions, and one of them must be... bingo! A map of this base!"

"That's great, Clemont! So, you know where all the captured Pokemon are?" Bonnie asked.

"Give me a second..." Clemont said, fiddling with the device more.
"Yes! I know exactly how to reach it! Follow me!"

Clemont lead the group through the Team Omega base. From time to time, they encountered a couple grunts who tried to stop them, but their Pokemon quickly fell before the might the intruders' Pokemon. They also made sure to block their escape so Serena could put them to sleep with Selkid's sing. There was no need to release more of their Pokemon, as those currently out were more than enough to face the threats that crossed their path.

The base was almost nothing but sheets of metal welded together, with no decoration except that red Omega symbols painted on them at regular intervals. Some rooms had windows that allowed them to see what was inside: some appeared to be offices, other had computers and machinery, and others appeared to be chemistry labs, but none of them had any Pokemon prisoner inside.

"We're close!" Clemont told them. "This corridor leads to a large room, which I think it's some sort of control room or command center. To the right there's a corridor that leads to a large storage area where all the Pokemon are being held!"

"That's great!" Ash cheered, his gaze filled with resolve. "Come on guys, just a little more! Nothing can stop us now!"

They exited the corridor and entered the control room, but they were forced to skid to a halt, as, much to their surprise, they were greeted by a veritable *army* of Team Omega grunts - according to Clemont's stolen Team Omega helmet, there were twenty two people in the room-, each of them with a Pokemon already out.

"Welcome to our humble abode, children," a new voice said.

Several grunts in the middle moved aside to make room for the source of the voice: A bald, fair skinned man in a Team Omega uniform, except his had bigger shoulderplates, and a black cape

falling down his back. Unlike the grunts, he wasn't wearing a helmet, but he was wearing the one-eyed visor.

"Allow me to introduce myself. Captain Zebos, leader of Team Omega's Alpha Division, and main overseer of its operations," the man said, making an exaggerated bow. "We've been waiting for you."

"... you were?" Serena asked.

"You know, your friend had the right idea with stealing one of our helmets. I'm sure it helped you navigate this base," Zebos said, pointing at Clemont. "Too bad he didn't think in switching off the radio communicator."

Clemont's face grew pale with horror at such an oversight on his part, while Bonnie and Dedenne shot the inventor an accusing look.

"Of course, we had to let you believe that we were none the wiser, at least until you were past a point where escaping was impossible. Otherwise you would have turned around and leave, and we couldn't have that. Not after you brats stole something that belongs to us," Zebos said, piercing Selkid with his glare.

Selkid whimpered, and hid behind Serena's leg.

"Selkid isn't yours to take!" Serena protested, standing protectively in front of the Sea Nymph Pokemon.

"I beg to differ. You stole it from my son, so now I'm taking it back," Zebos stated. Then, he looked at Greninja and Pikachu. "And I think we're going to take a few more Pokemon from you for the trouble you caused us. Yes, that Greninja of yours will fetch quite a price in the black market."

"Gre!" Greninja angrily hissed, as he took a fighting stance.

"Oh? Do you want to fight?" Zebos asked. "I admit, you stand a solid chance. I know about you, Ash Ketchum, and your friends. Your Greninja and Pikachu alone are a force to be reckoned with. But powerful as they are, they are only two Pokemon. We will crush you with our sheer numbers."

"If you think we will go down without a fight... !" Ash seethed.

"With or without a fight, you will go down," Zebos said, his lips curving into an ugly smirk.

"Not if I have something to say about it!" a new powerful voice said.

That moment, a large group of people entered the control room. Men and women of various ages wearing punkish clothes, and the same blue sleeveless jacket with a Dunsparce on its back. And leading them was a tall, broad shouldered man with slick black hair, a goatee of the same color, and a scar crossing his left cheek.

Ash and Serena had seen this man before: on a 'wanted' poster on Kevlar Town. This man was Richard Hunter, the leader of the Dunsparce Gang.

"The bikers!" Bonnie yelled, as she held Dedenne protectively.

The smirk disappeared from Zebos' face as he eyed Richard and his gang of bikers. "Well, well, well, look who decided to show up uninvited. The security of this place leaves a lot to be desired."

"Wait... aren't they on the same side?" Serena asked, a little confused, as the bikers began to fill the room, many of them standing between the teens and the Team Omega grunts.

"If that's the case... you guys aren't traffickers then?" Ash asked the bikers in general.

"Hell no! We might not exactly be law abiding citizens, but we do love Pokemon! We would never stoop to do something so horrible!"

Richard grimaced in disgust.

"These assholes were the ones poaching Pokemon to the highest bidder," another biker said. He had a powerful build like Richard and was of a similar age, but had dark skin, a full beard and a short mohawk. "While framing us for their crimes!"

"Exactly like Lou said," Richard said with a nod. "But not anymore! We knew about you and that you had a hideout somewhere around these parts, and thanks to these kids, we finally found it!"

"Wait... you've been following us?" Clemont asked, cringing at the idea that such an intimidating group had them on their sights.

"By pure chance, Amber there," Richard said, nodding at a female biker, a tall woman with long blond hair, who waved at them. "Saw your confrontation with that little shit over the Selkid. She told me about you, and I knew that, if you didn't seek Team Omega, they would go after you. And once that confrontation happened... we would be there both to provide help and settle the score."

"This changes nothing! You're nothing but a bunch of brutish, uneducated rabble! Team Omega, crush all of them!" Zebos commanded.

"Dunsparce Gang, show them what happens when scum like these mess with us!" Richard yelled, pokeball in hand. The other bikers soon followed suit.

"Go Arbok!"

"Time to kick ass, Dunsparce!"

"Fight, Tofurang!"

"Go into overdrive, Tancoon!"

"Go Dunsparce!"

"You too, Dunsparce!"

"Seek and Destroy, Sableye!"

Chaos engulfed the large control room as the bikers' Pokemon engaged those used by the Team Omega Grunts. Attacks flew in every direction, some finding their marks, others missing and crashing against either the walls or the electronic equipment spread around the room. In less than five minutes, the walls were covered in large cracks and burn marks, and all the electronics were made unusable, the worst being on fire.

The initial volley of attacks also caused Ash and his friends to scatter in different directions in order to dodge them, before they found safe spots to stay for the time being. Clemont was calling for Bonnie, but stopped once he saw that his little sister was with Serena.

Ash couldn't tell friend from foe, given the sheer amount of Pokemon duking it out. All Dunsparces being friendly was a conclusion easy to reach -for a given value of "friendly", if they were anything like his own Dunsparce-, but for the rest of the Pokemon, no idea. For the time being, Ash decided to play defense.

"Stay close, but don't move. Only attack when you're attacked, otherwise we may hit a friendly Pokemon," Ash told Greninja and Pikachu, the two of them nodding in agreement.

A Primeape ripped a piece of ruined equipment and chucked it against a Tofurang. Said Tofurang was then slammed by a Dunsparce's Rollout. A grey and pink Pokemon Ash didn't know -nor had the time to scan with his Pokedex- blasted another Dunsparce with a Hyper Voice. A Sableye used Night Slash on another Tofurang.

A Lombre bombarded a pair of Barel with a powerful Bubble Beam, before said Lombre was at the receiving end of an Arbok's Slam, which sent it crashing against a Flaafy that was fighting a Felunge. A trio of Tonemy flew towards Ash, ready to drown him and his

Pokemon in Poison Gas, but Pikachu was faster and zapped them with a Thunderbolt.

"Luxray, no!" Ash's heard Clemont's voice cry.

Despite the loud cacophony of noises product of the large battle, Ash managed to pinpoint Clemont's voice, and saw how his Luxray was being harrassed by a Gliscor and a couple Gligar. Clemont had released Bunnelby and Chespin, but they were having trouble defending their teammate.

"Greninja, help Clemont's Pokemon!" Ash ordered.

Greninja nodded, and leaped into the air, gracefully dodging all the ranged attacks that both sides were launching at each other, while a pair of Water Shuriken formed on his hands. Greninja launched the projectiles, hitting the Scorpion Pokemon with powerful blasts of water, getting them away from Luxray.

"Thank you!" a grateful Clemont shouted.

Ash was about to say something in return, when he heard Richard yell.

"Oh no, you're not getting away, you scum!" the biker leader said.

Ash's eyes locked onto Richard, and saw that the biker was chasing after Zebos, who just escaped through one of the control room's doors. Scowling, Ash immediately went after the two of them. He wasn't going to let that awful man get away with his crimes.

...

Meanwhile, at another side of the control room, Serena had released Braixen, who alongisde Selkid were defending their trainer and Bonnie from some Team Omega grunts that had surrounded her.

"Braixen, Hidden Power! Selkid, Hyper Voice!" Serena commanded.

Braixen and Selkid unleashed their attacks, easily pushing the enemy Pokemon back. Sure, the Team Omega grunts outnumbered them, but their Pokemon left a lot to be desired. Though if these criminals treated Pokemon as mere property to be sold, they probably wouldn't treat their own Pokemon that much better.

Then again, no one would join a criminal organization as low-ranked grunts if they were good trainers, Serena thought.

"Hey, Serena!" Bonnie called.

"Sorry Bonnie, but I'm a little busy right now!" Serena hurriedly replied. "Braixen, counter that with Flamethrower!"

"Serena, this is important!" Bonnie insisted, as the flamethrower cast a brief orange light over the area. "That door over there! According to what Clemont said, the captured Pokemon are all behind that door!"

"Really?" Serena shouted back, now feeling a little guilty for dismissing Bonnie like that. Resolve filled her eyes as she gazed upon the door. Their goal was now within reach. "Alright. We'll release the captured Pokemon. If the bikers keep the Team Omega guys occupied, they won't be able to stop us from releasing them. Braixen, Selkid, we need to make a path towards that door! Help them, Pancham and Sylveon!"

Serena and Bonnie moved towards the door as soon as they had the chance, though the constant battles made their progress frustratingly slow. Braixen and Pancham were mostly on the defensive, while the two Fairy types were kept close to the girls in order to protect them.

"Braixen, Fire Blast! Pancham, Dark Pulse!" Serena ordered. "Selkid, Hyper Voice! Sylveon, Protect!"

While Serena's Pokemon were doing fine, the Kalosian teen soon realized one of the cons of having so many Pokemon out at once: not being able to keep an eye on all of them. When Serena was

giving Selkid an order, Pancham was blindsided by an Owten's Wing Attack, sending him crashing backwards.

"Pancham!" Serena cried.

"Good job, Owten! Now use Confusion!" the Team Omega grunt in command of the Owten shouted.

"Tancoon, Take Down!" a new female voice said.

Before Owten could deliver another attack, it was slammed by a canine-looking black and brown Pokemon. The hit send Owten crashing against a steel wall.

"Good job, Tancoon! Now Arbok, Bind that asshole and use Glare!" the same female voice said.

Serena could see now it belonged to one of the bikers, a very tall girl -Serena wondered if the Dunsparce Gang had a height requirement for its members, given that all of them were pretty tall- with brown skin and black spiky hair, the right side so long it covered the right half of her face, the left side so short it was almost shaved. A large tatoo of an Arbok was coiled around her left arm.

She was wearing the gang's common sleeveless blue shirt with a Dunsparce logo behind on top of a dark fuchsia t-shirt cut above her belly, short jeans, and dark green boots. Unlike the other members of the gang, who were in their thirties or forties, this girl appeared to be no older than eighteen.

Before the Team Omega grunt could do anything, an Arbok silently slithered behind him and quickly coiled around his body.

"What the-"

"Shaabak!" Arbok locked eyes with the hapless grunt, who quickly fell to the paralisys. Once done, Arbok released her prey, which collapsed on the ground.

"Well done, guys!" the biker girl praised her Pokemon.

Taking advantage of the respite, Serena pulled out her Pokedex to scan the unknown Pokemon from her savior.

" Tancoon, the Racoon Dog Pokemon. Dark/Normal. They are mischievous, and are known to steal food from small Pokémon or journeying trainers." the Pokedex droned.

Tancoon was a mostly brown canine Pokemon, similar in size to a Growlithe or a Poochyena. It had black ears, tail, and paws, as well as a v-shaped black mark on its forehead. It had two large claws at the end of each paw, and two fangs stuck out of its closed jaws.

"Hey, you okay?" the biker girl asked.

"Now we are. Thank, you, ummm..." Serena began.

"Aisha. Nice to meet you. And you're welcome," Aisha said, smiling at her.

"I'm Serena, and this is Bonnie," Serena said.

"Hello," Bonnie said with a wave.

"What are you guys doing here in the open? In case you haven't noticed, this place has become a battleground," Aisha cringed as a loud explosion blasted at the other side of the room. "You should find a place that has a good cover!"

"We can't do that! Those traffickers had their Pokemon locked behind this door, and we have to save them!" Bonnie retorted, pointing at the door.

Aisha's visible eye opened wide, before she looked at the door. "You should have started from there then!"

Serena pressed the red button next to the door, and it slid opened with a whoosh. Free of obstacles, the three girls and their Pokemon

finally entered the storage room where all the Pokemon were being kept. Once inside the dimly lit room, Serena could see multiple Selkid, Minicorn, Colarva, Eevee, Luxi, and many more Pokemon she hadn't seen before, but if they were here they were probably rare and valuable.

Needless to say, all of them looked miserable, and reacted with fear when the trio of girls entered the room. Like Selkid before, they weren't too trusting of any human being nor Pokemon affiliated with them.

"Fear not guys, we're here to save you!" Bonnie announced, trying to both sound heroic and soothe the visibly scared Pokemon.

"Nenene!" Dedenne added.

"This is awful. Look at this Pokemon, forced to live in these cramped cages," Serena said, kneeling before a cage containing a sad looking Eevee. "How can somebody treat Pokemon like this?"

"The world is full of scumbags, there's no point in mulling over that," Aisha said, shaking her head, as she began to open the cages. "Fortunately, the world also has good people like you and me. Come on, time to return these little fellas to where they belong."

Serena and Bonnie nodded, as they began to open the cages one by one, releasing the Pokemon inside.

...

Running through another hallway covered in sleek metal, Ash followed Richard, who was in turn following Zebos. It seemed that Zebos had summoned every other grunt to the main control room, given that no more grunts crossed their paths.

The chase eventually led them to another control room full of computers, as well as monitors covering the wall in front of the door, but no way to escape. It wasn't as big as the one where the main

battle was taking place but it was still rather spacey. There, they found Zebos frantically typing on one of the keyboards. hitting the last key with a satisfied grunt.

"And done!" Zebos triumphantly said.

"Yeah. You're pretty much done," Richard deadpanned. "What the hell were you doing? I thought you'd take this chance to escape like the vermin you are!"

"Escape? From you? Don't make me laugh!" Zebos replied, as he pulled out a pokeball. "No I'm not afraid of any of you. But I know that you're not entirely stupid, and you probably had somebody alert the Rangers of the position of this base, meaning that it's compromised. So it was imperative to purge all our servers of incriminating information."

"That's so noble of you, sacrificing yourself to protect your buddies," Richard said, as he pulled out a pokeball of his own. "Though in the end, it will be worthless. All of you are going down."

"I'd like to see you try! Lucario, go!" Zebos said, sending his pokeball.

The capture device opened, releasing the Aura Pokemon. A rectangular device with a red Omega symbol on it was strapped to its chest.

"Go Dunsparce!" Richard said, releasing the Pokemon whose gang was named after.

"Go Dunsparce!" Ash echoed, sending his own Dunsparce. "You too, Pikachu!"

"You have a Dunsparce too?" Richard asked, beaming at Ash. "I'm starting to like you more and more, kid!"

The Team Omega Captain let out a loud laugh. "Really? That's what you plan to use to fight my Lucario? A pair of worms and a filthy rat?"

"You make a big mistake underestimating us," Ash warned him.

"Oh really? Let's see..." Zebos tapped the side of his visor, and information flashed in front of him. "Ha! Your Pikachu's power is high, I give you that, but those Dunsparce barely reach to the sole of my Lucario's feet! My Lucario could wipe the floor with all of you without needing to use the Muscular Enhancer," he then pulled a small remote, the same remote Maury had used, and pressed a button on it. "Then again, why take the risk? Plus, this way the beatdown will be even more brutal!"

The device hummed to life as the Omega symbol glowed with a red light. Lucario winced in pain, closing his eyes shut as the device worked to strengthen its body. The Aura Pokemon opened its eyes, which were now bloodshot red, as his mouth formed an ugly snarl.

"Richard, be very careful right now! I've seen that before! That device made Lucario much stronger!" Ash warned the biker.

"You did?" Richard asked.

"Yeah, a boy affiliated with Team Omega used it on his Pokemon," Ash explained. "You said he was your son, right?"

"Just because you beat my incompetent son, I'm going to be an easy prey?" Zebos asked, outraged. "Maury made the mistake to think the Muscular Enhancer is a replacement for training, but I'm not him! I trained my Lucario to reach the peak of its power, and with the Enhancer's help, its strength is on par with a legendary Pokemon!"

As somebody who had witnessed the power of multiple legendary Pokemon, Ash had some big doubts about such claim, but decided to let Zebos dwell on his delusion. Then again, Ash had also witnessed the effects of the Muscular Enhancer so, he knew that Lucario had become extremely dangerous.

"Richard, be careful, I already saw that device in action before. That Lucario has now the strength to knock out our Pokemon in one or two hits at most," Ash warned the biker.

"Are you kidding me!? Then how are we going to beat that guy?" Richard asked in disbelief.

"Follow my lead. For the time being, we'll fight defensively," Ash said. "Let's try to make that Lucario exert itself as much as possible, then we strike."

"Very well, kid. Let's hope you're right."

"I take that's how you defeated Maury? By having your Pokemon dance around his until they tired out? Ha!" Zebos mocked. "Such tactic won't work on me! My Lucario's stamina is an endless ocean! It can fight for hours on end if I order him to!"

"Let's put that theory to test then!" Ash said. "Pikachu, Thunderbolt!"

Pikachu jumped into the air, his body crackling with electricity, as he channeled all that energy into a single lightning bolt towards Lucario.

"Lucario, deflect it with Bone Rush!" Zebos ordered. "Then counterattack!"

"LU!" Lucario summoned a long bone made of green energy between its paws, and spun it in front of him, dispersing the Thunderbolt into smaller electric bolts that flew in different directions.

After Lucario blocked the attack, it gripped the bone tightly, holding it like a combat staff, and rushed towards the trio of yellow Pokemon.

"Pikachu, dodge! Dunsparce, Dig!" Ash ordered.

"Dunsparce, Shadow Ball!" Richard shouted.

Pikachu jumped backwards just as Ash's Dunsparce drilled through the metal floor to bury himself underground. Meanwhile, Richard's

Dunsparce raised its tail, forming a large orb of darkness on its tip. Flicking its tail, it launched the sphere of shadows towards Lucario. Lucario struck the incoming projectile, but it also caused the energy bone to break as well.

Lucario then felt something under its feet, and fell back with a backflip as Ash's Dunsparce burst from underground, barely missing his target, much to the Land Snake Pokemon's frustration.

"You can't surprise Lucario! It can sense sneak attacks thanks to its aura!" Zebos boasted. "Now Lucario, Power-Up Punch on that Pikachu!"

"Cario!" Lucario dashed forward, clenching its right paw into a fist, which was covered in a bright orange aura.

Pikachu was able to move out of the way just as Lucario brought its fist forward hitting only a wall. However, the Power-Up Punch blew a huge hole in the wall, creating an impromptu passage to the next room, which appeared to be a large storage room with a few crates scattered around, as well as a few ground vehicles. The ground was made of concrete rather than metal, and the walls weren't covered in metal, leaving its brick and mortar composition visible. There was also a large garage door that presumably lead outside.

"Whoa! What a destructive power!" Richard said in horror.

"It's the effect of several Sword Dances in a row," Ash told him. He then looked at the adjacent storage room. "Let's move the fight there, we'll have more room to avoid its attacks."

"Got it," Richard agreed.

As the teen, the biker and their Pokemon entered the storage room, Zebos and his Lucario followed them.

"So now you're the ones who want to escape from me? Well, I can't allow that! Lucario, Blaze Kick!" Zebos ordered.

Lucario leaped into the air as one of his legs was coated in bright red flames. It then dived towards the trio of yellow Pokemon, landing between them foot first. The moment his fire-coated foot touched the ground, it produced a fiery explosion that blasted Pikachu and the two Dunsparce in different directions each.

"Does it sink yet how hopelessly outmatched you're against me? You stand no chance against Team Omega!" Zebos boasted.

Despite taking almost no damage from the fight, Lucario flinched. Ash noticed this, followed by how heavy his breathing was becoming. It was close.

"Dunsparce, Ancient Power!" Richard ordered.

"Parce!" Richard's Dunsparce cried, as it summoned a spinning circle of small glowing spheres above it. The spheres then grew in size, taking the form of large, golden boulders, before they flew towards Lucario.

"Lucario, deflect once again with Bone Rush!" Zebos ordered.

And once again, Lucario summoned yet another bone staff made of green energy, and used it to smash to bits the coming rock projectiles.

"Pikachu, Iron Tail from above! Dunsparce, Rollout, aim for the legs!" Ash ordered.

Pikachu leaped towards Lucario in a wide arc, as his tail glowed with a metallic sheen, and readied it to hit Lucario with it. Meanwhile, Dunsparce coiled into a ball, and rolled towards the aura Pokemon.

"Lucario, dodge and then Aura Sphere!" Zebos ordered.

In an awe-inspiring display of agility, Lucario jumped sideways, avoiding both Pikachu's Iron tail and Dunsparce's Rollout, as it formed a blue and white sphere of energy between its paws, before

tossing it at Pikachu. Unable to block or dodge, the Mouse Pokemon was hit by the attack, and was blasted backwards, crashing against a nearby crate.

"Pikachu!" Ash cried.

While hurt, Pikachu managed to jump back to his feet, and nodded at Ash, making him know Pikachu could still fight.

" I guess I should be lucky Aura Sphere isn't affected by the Muscular Enhancer, since it's not a physical attack," Ash thought.

"Dunsparce, Flamethrower!" Richard ordered.

"Cut through it with Blaze Kick!" Zebos ordered.

Richard's Dunsparce opened its mouth, releasing a torrent of flames at Lucario. Lucario's right leg was coated in flames once again, and delivered a flying kick at Dunsparce. Thanks to its own fiery cover, Lucario was able to plow through Dunsparce's attack, minimizing the effect of the super effective attack, before slamming its foot against Dunsparce, resulting in a fiery blast, and Dunsparce was send rolling backwards until it crashed against a concrete wall.

"Dunsparce!" Richard cried, as he rushed to check his Pokemon. While that hit had hurt Dunsparce quite a bit, it wasn't hurt enough to give up the fight. "I guess the Flamethrower must have softened the blow..."

"Time to finish this! Lucario, Power-Up Punch on that Pikachu!" Zebos ordered, as he pointed at Ash's Pikachu.

Lucario prepared to attack, but much to Zebos' surprise, the Aura Pokemon winced, before dropping to his knees and clutching its chest, while loudly hissing in pain.

"Lucario, what the hell are you doing!? I said Power-Up Punch!" Zebos roared.

"You asked before how did I beat Maury. Well, this is how," Ash began. "That Muscular Enhancer gives your Pokemon a truly monstrous power boost. But said power comes at the expense of putting the Pokemon's body under an equally monstrous strain. And Lucario's body reached its limit. It won't be able to fight anymore."

"That... that's nonsense!" Zebos shouted, his face red with anger.

"You seem surprised by this. Didn't Maury tell you about the little flaw in your invention?" Ash asked. "Or maybe he told you but you refused to listen to him?"

Zebos didn't answer, he merely gritted his teeth, as his eyes drifted back and forth between Ash and his suffering Lucario.

"Your silence is rather telling. You're right about one thing, though. It's time to finish this! Pikachu, Electroball Dunsparce, Rollout!"

"Dunsparce, Flamethrower again!" Richard ordered.

Pikachu jumped into the air, forming a yellow orb of electricity on the tip of his tail, before swinging it at Lucario, just as Richard's Dunsparce exhaled a torrent of flames. Both attacks impacted Lucario at once, setting it ablaze as electricity shocked its body, before Ash's Dunsparce, coiled into a rolling ball, slammed into it, sending it crashing backwards, before it fell on its back.

"Lucario, get up! Get up you useless mutt!" Zebos roared. But Lucario was too weak to move, much less continue the fight.

"Sir!" That moment, a jeep with two Team Omega grunts on it skidded near their leader. "We need to go! Our troops have been beaten, and those bikers released our goods!" the grunt on the passenger's seat said. "The Rangers will be here at any moment."

Seething, Zebos recalled his downed Lucario, shot one last hateful glare at Ash and Richard and jumped onto the jeep, before it dashed for the opening garage door.

"No! We can't let him-" Richard tried to reach him in vain. He curled his hands into fists as he watched the jeep get away. "Of all the times of not having my bike..."

"You made a powerful enemy today, brat!" Zebos threatened as the car drove away. "You better sleep with one eye open as long as you're in Tandor!"

And with that, Zebos and his two remaining grunts abandoned the base.

Richard let out a sigh. "We'll get him next time. At the very least, they won't be able to cause more problems around this zone anymore," Richard said, as he returned his Dunsparce.

"Plus we saved all the captive Pokemon. That's what matters the most," Ash said.

...

Two hours later, outside the Team Omega Base

After Team Omega had been subdued, the Dunsparce bikers rounded them up and herded them outside -at least those who hadn't managed to escape-, waiting for the Rangers, who had been warned shortly before the bikers assaulted the underground base.

All the Pokemon captured by Team Omega were also waiting outside. Many of them wanted to follow their survival instinct and run away as fast as possible. Fortunately, Serena's Selkid managed to calm them down and explain them that such an action would be extremely foolish, since many of them were too far from home.

Once the Rangers arrived, they began to take care of the situation. They brought multiple vans, both to take the Team Omega grunts away and to transport the trafficked Pokemon back to their natural habitats.

While this happened, the Captain of this group of Rangers, a woman in her late twenties with short light brown hair, was addressing both the bikers and Ash and his friends.

"Even if I would generally not condone acts outside the law such as this one, I think I'm going to let this go, given how much we've managed to accomplish thanks to your help," the Ranger Captain said. "Good job, but if the next time you find evidence or hints of illegal activities, please report them to the next Ranger Station."

"That would have been hard, given that we were unjustly persecuted for crimes we didn't commit," Amber said, pursing her lips.

"Yeah, about those charges on the wanted posters..." Richard continued.

The Ranger Captain sighed, but smiled. "Given all the evidence that we managed to acquire here, it's more than enough to exonerate your group of such accusations," the Ranger said, as she pulled out a tablet and began to tap on it. "And, as an unofficial reward for your help dismantling this criminal cell, as well as compensation for the false trafficking charges, I think I'm going to remove from your sheets all the minor offenses such as vandalism or harassment."

"You heard that guys? We're clean!" Richard cheered.

"YEAH!" the bikers chorused back.

The Ranger Captain shook her head. "Don't think this means you're free to do whatever you please. If you guys cause any trouble again, the Rangers will fall upon you with all the weight of the law, you got it?"

Richard shot her a sly smile. "We'll be on our best behavior. We promise."

She nodded. "Good."

Another Ranger, this one with spiky reddish brown hair, walked towards the Captain. "Captain Kate, both the Pokemon and the detainees have been loaded onto the vans. We're ready to go."

"Alright Keith. Let's go then," Kate said, as she walked towards one of the vans before getting inside it.

The Ranger Vans drove away, leaving Ash and his friends alone with the biker gang. Richard looked at the teens (and Bonnie), and smiled.

Richard clapped his hands. "Well, we're no longer on the Rangers' wanted list, and it's all thanks to you guys. Not to mention, you saved a lot of Pokemon from a miserable fate. I think a little compensation is in order, don't you think?"

"Eh, it's okay. We only did what we thought was right," Ash said.

"Yeah. If we helped more people than we intended, then the better," Serena added.

"Nonsense! We of the Dunsparce Gang never forget a debt! So, from now onwards, you four are all members of the Dunsparce Gang!" Richard declared, and the rest of the bikers cheered again, "Normally, there are two requisites to become a member of this gang: to have a Dunsparce and a motorbike. Ash has a Dunsparce, and since you're too young to drive, we'll overlook that for the time being. Bring them their official Dunsparce Gang jackets!"

Two bikers stepped forward, carrying a pair of jackets each, and handed them to the four kids.

"Thanks a lot for the present," Ash said, smiling at them, as he looked at the jacket.

"How is that you guys have jackets of Bonnie's size?" Clemont asked, as he saw his sister putting on her jacket and making a twirl.

"That used to be Aisha's. I hope you don't mind it being a hand-me-down," Lou spoke up. "Aisha always wanted to be part of the gang since she was little. Do you guys want to see pictures of her when she was a kid driving her little toy bike? She was so cute-"

Aisha cut him off by punching him in the shoulder, making the large man wince.

"Goddamit uncle, put a sock on it!" Aisha yelled at him. "No one wants to see my childhood pictures!"

"Anyway, when you guys are old enough to drive a motorbike, if you want, there will always be room for you among the Dunsparce Gang," Richard said, as he and his friends started to get on their respective motorbikes, which they had left parked next to the hideout's entrance.

"Where are you guys going? Maybe we can give you a ride," Amber offered.

"Thanks for the offer, but we prefer to walk," Ash politely declined.

"Yeah, part of traveling through a new region is to appreciate its scenery," Serena added.

"Understandable Tandor has a lot of beautiful sights to see. In that case, I wish you guys a safe travel and good luck on whatever goals you're pursuing," Richard said. "Dunsparces, let's ride!"

Loud engine noises filled the air as the motorbikes started up and sped away, leaving trails of dust behind them. After a few seconds, there was no trace of the bikers anymore, and silence reigned once again.

"I think we should get going," Serena said, before she pulled out her tablet, and checked their position on the region. "Despite this detour, we can still reach Kevlar Town before nightfall if we walk at a good pace."

"Very well. Let's go then," Ash said.

...

An hour later, the group was walking through the main path of Owten Nook. The sun was beginning to set, bathing the scenery in a soft orange glow, that would soon follow by the cover of the night. Fortunately, even if they were still far away, they could already see Kevlar Town in the distance.

"Boy, I'm exhausted!" Ash said, stretching his arms. "After everything that happened today, I can't wait to get to the Pokemon Center, have a good dinner, then go to bed and sleep like a Snorlax!"

"I think all of us are pretty spent," Clemont agreed. "Nothing that a good night of sleep can't fix, though."

"Pika..." Pikachu said, shaking his head. Then, his ears perked, and stood alert. "Pi?"

"Something wrong, buddy?" Ash asked, noticing his friend's change in demeanor. He turned around. "Is somebody following... us...?"

Serena, Clemont and Bonnie also turned around. And indeed, there was somebody following them. Three somebodies, to be exact. Much to their surprise, it was no other than the Minicorn, Eevee and Colarva that they had helped earlier in the day, before they raided that Team Omeha hideout.

"It's you guys!" Bonnie cheered, happy to see them again.

"Why are you following us?" Ash asked, before he guessed the answer himself. "Do you want... to come with us?"

Minicorn took a step forward, and began to neigh. Ash didn't know what she was saying, but apparently Pikachu did, given the attention the electric mouse was paying to the Foal Pokemon.

"Pi, pika, pikapi, pi!" Pikachu began, motioning his arms emphatically.
"Pi, pikachu!"

"Really? Well, that makes sense..." Ash said.

"Um, Ash?" Serena asked, smiling a little. "Not all of us can understand your Pikachu..."

"Oh right! Hehe. Well, from what I could understand, Minicorn and his friends didn't go far away after they led us to the Team Omega base. They saw how we stopped those criminals and released all the Pokemon they had captured," Ash said. "They consider us trustworthy enough to ask to take them with us."

"That's great!" Serena beamed, clapping her hands. "So, how do we do the split? It's three Pokemon and three of us, since Bonnie isn't a trainer yet."

Both Ash and Clemont smiled at Serena knowingly. "We all know what Pokemon you want the most, Serena," Ash began.

Serena smiled back at the boys, grateful for their gesture, and took a step towards Minicorn. "Hey Minicorn. Would you like to join me? I'd love to have you in my team, and my Pokemon are very friendly and would welcome you with open arms."

Micorn neighed happily, stomping one hoof on the ground in affirmation.

"Hey Clemont, can we get the Eevee? Since Serena got hers, I always wanted to have one," Bonnie pleaded Clemont, as she tugged him by his sleeve repeatedly.

"That would depend on Eevee," Clemont said, turning towards the Evolution Pokemon. "What do you say, Eevee? Would you like to join my team?"

"Yeah, you'll have like, lots of fun with us! And Clemont is a superb cook!" Bonnie added.

"Ev, evui!" Eevee agreed, as he walked towards the sibling duo.

"That means that Colarva is stuck with me then," Ash said, before adding. "That's it, if you want to join me. What do you say, Colarva?"

"CO!" Colarva then launched himself at Ash's face, knocking him on his back as he wrapped all his limbs around his head, while buzzing happily. "Co, colarva!"

"Hehe, such a cuddlebug," Bonnie chuckled.

Ash managed to pry Colarva from his face and placed it on the ground, before chuckling himself as well. "Heh, I take that as a yes."

Once all the choices had been made, Ash, Serena and Clemont pulled out empty pokeballs, and tossed them at one of the three Pokemon in front of them. The pokeballs opened upon hitting the pokemon, absorbing them inside, before they fell to the ground. None of them shook, and dinged immediately, signaling a successful capture. The three trainers walked towards their respective pokeballs and picked them up.

"Today is a great day for science, I caught an Eevee!" Clemont said, raising Eevee's pokeball.

"Ta-dah! I caught a Minicorn!" Serena cheered, holding the pokeball with both hands.

"I caught a Colarva!" Ash shouted, raising the pokeball above his head.

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu cheered as well.

The three of them took a moment to look at the pokeballs that held the new member of their respective teams, before putting them with the others, and continued their journey.

Today would be a day that they would remember for a long time. Not only did they took down a criminal cell, saved lots of trafficked Pokemon and befriended a gang of bikers, but also incorporated three new friends to their group.

And given that their journey just barely begun, they wondered what other surprises Tandor was storing for them.

Author's Note: Man, I was aiming for this story to be more on the short end, yet here I am, writing 13K word chapters again. Well, I hope you guys enjoyed it.

First of all, yeah, the Dunsparce Gang aren't the bad guys, and if you played Uranium, this revelation shouldn't come as a surprise. Though, even if you didn't, I did say in the previous chapter's note that Ash and friends had nothing to worry about them. You didn't believe me? What, you thought I was being sarcastic or something? XP

Which leads us to the true villains of this chapter: Team Omega. First of all, no, Team Omega doesn't exist in the game, it's 100% a creation of my own. The reason is that Uranium's true villain spends most of the time in the background, and doesn't show up to directly confront the heroes until rather late in the story. So in the meantime, I came up with Team Omega to have a more direct antagonist. Though, don't think they will be filler villains; they're based on canonical elements that I'm going to expand, and thus their presence will be tightly tied to many important events of the game's story.

And then there's the last point of the chapter: Ash, Serena and Clemont getting a new Pokemon each. Yeah, Ash got a new Pokemon the previous chapter, and Serena got another one not long ago. But I want many captures to happen early in the story so I have time to properly develop every Tandorian Pokemon.

Also, make sure to check the Ao3 version for a picture of Zebos and the Team Omega grunts.

After two Gym battles back to back followed by another action heavy chapter involving a villainous organization, guess our heroes earned a little rest before their adventure continues. In the meantime, don't forget to drop a review with your comments on this chapter!

Some Rest, at last!

Author's Note: Something that I forgot to mention last chapter, but surely you noticed that my depiction of Ancient Power is very different from the anime. That's because I'm not that fond of the anime version, it hardly looks like a Rock-type move. So yeah, Ancient Power here is like pre-XY Stone Edge, except the rocks have a golden aura around them.

Chapter 10:

Some Rest, at last!

Kevlar Town

The group arrived at Kevlar Town at nightfall. Exhausted as they were, they only had a light dinner, and went straight to bed. All four of them fell asleep as soon as their bodies touched the mattress, and slept like logs for many, many hours. The very next day, they woke up completely refreshed and recharged.

Given that there were still a few days left until the contest in Moki Town would take place, and they needed less than a day to cross the distance between the two towns, the group decided to take at least one day of leisure in order to recover from the trepidation from the previous day.

After they finished their breakfast, one of the first things that was suggested was to introduce the newcomers to the group. Once they were on the empty lobby, they released all their previous Pokemon first, before sending the new three Pokemon last.

"Guys, these are Minicorn, Eevee and Colarva," Ash began, motioning his arms at the aforementioned Pokemon. "Mincorn is

with Serena, Eevee with Clemont, and Colarva with me. Make sure you give them a warm welcome!"

All the Pokemon present greeted the trio of newcomers. Well, except Dunsparce, who remained silent and rolled his eyes in annoyance.

"We decided to give everybody, ourselves included, a free day, so no training. Why don't you guys take this as a chance get acquainted with your new friends?" Serena suggested.

Pikachu quickly walked towards Colarva, and convinced the bug to meet Greninja, Birbie and Dunsparce. The former two gave Colarva a warm welcome, which the insect returned with an effusive multi-armed hug. Birbie accepted the hug happily, Greninja mostly out of politeness. Then it was Dunsparce's turn, and the Land Snake Pokemon muttered a welcome under his breath,

This didn't save him from Colarva's effusive hugs.

"DUNSPARCE! PARCE!" Dunsparce yelled, trashing wildly as he tried to get the Ice and Bug type Pokemon away from his body. But Colarva happily and obliviously held onto him.

Selkid was the one who eased Minicorn into meeting Braixen, Pancham and Sylveon. Fortunately for the foal Pokemon, all of Serena's Pokemon were rather approachable and easygoing, and Minicorn was slowly becoming more and more comfortable around them.

Lastly, there was Eevee, who was warmly welcomed by all of Clemont's Pokemon, Dedenne included. He was a little intimidated by Luxray at first, but quickly relaxed when the Gleam Eyes Pokemon told the newcomer something -probably reassuring Eevee not to be afraid of him-. Then Eevee heard something, and looked in the direction of Serena's Pokemon.

And there she was. Sylveon, happily chatting with Minicorn. Eevee's eyes grew wide as his mouth was open agape... before he narrowed

his eyes, his mouth turned into a sly smile, and strutted towards Sylveon.

"Ev! Eevee!" Eevee introduced himself to the Interwinning Pokemon with what sounded like a pick-up line, shooting Sylveon a seductive stare -or what he believed was seductive-, wiggling his nonexistent eyebrows at her.

"S-Syl..." Sylveon chuckled sheepishly as a bead of sweat ran down her neck.

Back with Clemont's Pokemon, Luxray tilted his head quizzically, Chespin glared daggers at the newcomer, while Bunnelby sighed and shook his head.

...

While the Pokemon were on their own, the group gathered on the lobby, and wondered what to do. Though, Clemont already seemed to have an idea. Sitting on one of the many empty tables, Clemont began to dig inside his backpack, pulling first a laptop, and then the helmet he had stolen from that Team Omega grunt, and linked them both with a cable.

"Hey, that's the helmet you got from the hideout," Serena said upon seeing the object. "What do you plan to do with it?"

"Unfortunately, that Zebos guy wiped the base's servers clean before the Rangers seized it," Clemont began, as his fingers began to hit the keys with practiced ease. "However, while the helmets' built-in computer was linked to those servers, the internal memory isn't. I managed to download some information into the helmet before the wipeout, but I'm also going to see what additional information I can get out of this."

"I thought the Rangers had taken all those helmets away," Ash pointed out. "How is that they let you keep that one?"

"Well, not to brag, but some of the Rangers know who I am and what I can do, despite being from another region, and believed I could help with this," Clemont said, proudly smiling puffing out his chest a little. He then looked back at the helmet resting on the table. "First, I want to make sure I extract every last bit of information before I begin tinkering with it. The technology on this helmet is something I have never seen before."

"Yeah. I never saw something that could measure a Pokemon's power like that," Serena commented, taking a closer look at the helmet's one-eyed visor. "Not even a Pokedex can do that."

Ash crossed his arms. "I don't think a Pokemon's worth can be reduced to mere numbers like that. Pokemon are much more than simple power."

"Pika," Pikachu nodded.

"Still, knowing the power of an opposing Pokemon is advantageous in battle. Every bit of information you can get out of your opponent helps," Clemont pointed out.

"If you ask me, those Team Omega guys are too obsessed with power," Ash continued. "Did I tell you about that Muscular Enhancer gadget? Two times it was used against me, two times they failed to beat my Pokemon. Why? Because there's more to Pokemon, and Pokemon battles, that brute strength."

"But that's because the Muscular Enhancer puts the Pokemon's body under a huge strain. Imagine if they perfect it so it has no drawbacks," Serena said, and shivered at the thought of having to fight a Pokemon like that.

"Clemont, do you think it's possible for them to do that?" Bonnie asked, sharing Serena's worry.

"I don't know, but I'm inclined to say no," Clemont replied. "To increase a Pokemon's attributes in such a big way in a short span of

time, without any negative side effects... I can't see how they could do it."

Ash nodded. "The path to true strength has no shortcuts."

Serena couldn't help but chuckle. "That sounded so sagacious, Ash. Did you come up with that yourself?"

"Eh, no, I think I heard that from an Elite Four member. I think it was Bruno?" Ash asked, scratching his cheek. "Anyway, that doesn't make it any less false."

"It seems that the Muscular Enhancer is only the tip of the iceberg. These people seem to be working on a lot of gadgets to increase Pokemon's attributes," Clemont continued typing as more blueprints popped in the screen. "There's a Psionic Enhancer for Pokemon that use special attacks, as well as a Motion Enhancer that increases speed. And many more."

"What do they plan to do with all those things?" Ash asked.

"From the data I'm mining, it seems they sell their tech to their highest bidder," Clemont said, eyes fixed on the screen.

"So they don't just sell Pokemon," Bonnie concluded.

"Indeed. They had deals with criminal organizations from other regions as well. Team Rocket, Team Galactic, Team Plasma, Cipher, Team Zenith, the Abyssal Cult, the New Elders..." Clemont said, reading the names of their buyers.

Ash knew some of those names, as he had encountered those organizations on his journeys to other regions, though others didn't ring any bell.

"Now that you mention Team Rocket..." Ash began, as a realization dawned upon him. "We've been on this region for almost two weeks, and they haven't show up yet."

"Wait, did you expect Team Rocket to follow you all the way to Tandor?" Serena asked, raising an eyebrow.

"They've been following me pretty much since I began my Pokemon journey, no matter what region I've been to," Ash said, shrugging a little. "They've been rather insistent in capturing Pikachu."

"... seriously? Wow. I knew those guys were stubborn, but that's some dedication," Serena said, shaking her head. "Though, that does indeed raises the question of why aren't they following you now."

"Maybe they saw the error of their ways, quit Team Rocket and turned a new leaf?" Bonnie innocently suggested.

"I don't think they'd do that, but it'd be great if they did turn around their lives," Ash said, smiling a little.

"Though, speaking of criminal gangs, I have the feeling that we may encounter those guys again," Serena began. "And if we do, we won't have a way to alert the Rangers of their presence. So we should buy Pokegears for all of us."

"Good idea! On top of that, we can also keep in contact in case we split up," Clemont suggested.

"Yeah, like when you start working on that power plant. We might not be able to be together anymore, but that way we can talk to each other whenever we want," Bonnie said.

"Good idea! Given that Clemont's busy, let's go the three of us," Ash proposed.

"Actually..." Bonnie began, feigning thoughtfulness. "I think somebody should stay here and make sure all the Pokemon behave and play nice, especially with the newcomers. So why don't you and Serena go to buy the Pokegears?"

Bonnie then winked at Serena in the most unsubtle way ever known to a human. Ash just looked at Bonnie a bit confused, while Serena grew stiff, before letting out a sigh.

"Um, okay. Let's go, Serena," Ash said, as he began to walk towards the Pokemon Center's exit.

Serena trailed after him, before giving one last look at Bonnie, who waved at her while smiling mischeviously. Serena mouthed a silent "thank you" before leaving the building as well.

...

Despite Kevlar being a small town, its Pokemart was rather well stocked. Not just with the most common products bought by trainers such as potions or pokeballs, but it also had a small electronics section that sold pokegears. After choosing the ones that offered the best balance between price and functionality, Ash and Serena bought four of them. They were color coded: blue for Ash, pink for Serena, green for Clemont and yellow for Bonnie.

Since they were on the Pokemart, they took the chance to restock on some of their other supplies as well.

Once they were done with their shopping, they walked through the town until they found a small park with a few benches on it. The duo sat on one of the benches, and immediately after, they opened their new gear and strapped them on their wrists and switched them on. The display quickly flashed to life, displaying the time of the day, current weather, and current location.

"Heh, they look good on us, don't they?" Ash asked, holding his wrist to his eye level.

"Indeed," Serena said, as she scrolled through the menu. "Oh, we need to exchange our numbers! Give me yours and I'll call you so can have mine."

"Alright," Ash said, as he handed Serena the slip of paper where his number was written. As Serena introduced the number, Ash continued to admire his Pokegear. "Heh, I can't believe I didn't think of buying one of these sooner."

"Yeah, with all the times we got split in Kalos, they would have been useful," Serena said. Once she was done typing Ash's number, Ash's Pokegear beeped a couple times, as Serena's number flashed on the screen.

"Oh, that reminds me!" Ash said, as a realization dawned upon him. "Let me call mom! That way she'll have my number too. I'm sure she'll be happy to know that she can call me now herself instead of having to wait for me to call her."

Ash introduced his home's phone number. After a couple rings, Delia's face appeared on the Pokegear's small screen.

"Hey there, mom!" Ash greeted her.

"Ash! It's so nice to see you," Delia said, greeting her son. Then she looked at Serena and smiled at her. "Hello to you too, Serena."

"Hello, Mrs. Ketchum," Serena replied.

Delia's expression then turned quizzical. "Ash, where are you calling me from? You don't look to be inside a Pokemon Center."

"Oh, that's because I'm calling you from my new Pokegear!" Ash told her. "We decided to buy one for each of us, so in case we're separated, we can still stay in contact. Oh, and you can call me if you want too! Isn't that great?"

"Indeed it is!" Delia said with a nod. "Though, tell me, what have you guys been doing? How is Tantor?"

"Tantor's great mom. Oh, look!" Ash said, as he began to dig through his backpack, before pulling out his badge case. He opened

it, revealing his only badge. "Look mom! I already have one badge!"

"That's great, son. But that's just one of your steps to get into the League, isn't it?" Delia said, before adding: "Not that I want to undermine your achievements or anything!"

"I know. But I wanted to show you because the gym leader made me sweat ink to earn it. Gym Leaders in Tandor are so tough!" Ash said.

"You should have been there, Mrs. Ketchum. It was a battle worthy of a League," Serena added, her eyes twinkling in excitement as her mind replayed the battle.

"I'm sure it was. And what about you, dear? Ash told me you were doing Contests?" Delia asked.

"Yes. I have taken part in a contest but..." Serena blushed a little, averting Delia's gaze. "... I didn't win it."

"Oh, don't worry about it. I'm sure you'll start winning sooner or later," Delia reassured her. "After all, you just begun your journey. Just keep working hard."

"I will, Mrs. Ketchum," Serena said.

"Sorry to cut you here, but there are some chores that need to be done," Delia apologized. "Though, thanks a lot for calling, Ash! I love to talk with you from time to time, and see how you are doing."

"I will call you again soon, mom. Bye!" Ash said, before his Pokenav's screen turned black once Delia ended the call.

Once the call ended, the two of them sat there, not saying anything for a few moments. Until Serena spoke.

"Your mom's a sweetheart," Serena said, giggling a little.

"I know. She's the best," Ash nodded, smiling back at her. "Though, yours is pretty great too."

"Still, I'm sure your mom didn't force you to practice for a profession you had no interest in taking," Serena said.

"Oh come on, she only worried about you," Ash defended Grace. "Besides, she was pretty supportive when you started doing showcases. And I'm sure she'll continue supporting you now as well when you tell her what are you doing."

"Do you want me to call her?" Serena asked.

"Yeah, why not?" Ash asked, his smile unwavering. "I'm sure she'll be super happy to hear from you."

"Pi-pika!" Pikachu encouraged her as well.

"Alright then," Serena said, as she typed her home's number on the Pokegear. After a couple ringtones, Grace's face appeared on the small screen.

"Hello?" she asked.

"Hey there, mom," Serena greeted her.

"Serena! It's so good to hear from you!" Grace beamed at her daughter. "So, are you in Hoenn already?"

"Oh, about that... in the end, I didn't went to Hoenn," upon seeing her mother's questioning look, Serena quickly added. "I'm on Tandor."

"Tandor? Isn't that the place where that nuclear meltdown happened all those years ago?" Grace questioned, sounding a little worried.

"Yeah, but you yourself said it. It was many years ago. It's totally safe now," Serena insisted. "Anyway, Tandor has contests too, so I decided to come here instead."

"I see. And..." Grace said, as her eyes moved towards Serena's companion. "Is that Ash Ketchum I see?"

"Hey there, Mrs. Gabena!" Ash cheerfully greeted her.

"Hello, Ash," Grace replied. "You know, I have the feeling that you have something to do behind Serena's change of plans."

"Hehe, yeah," he admitted, laughing sheepishly as he rubbed the back of his head. "Serena was going to go to Hoenn, but since Clemont, Bonnie and I were coming to Tandor, she decided to change her plans and come with us. That way, the group continues together."

"Of course, of course. The *group*. I'm sure that's the only reason she tagged along," Grace nodded, while shooting Serena a knowing look. The honey blond began to turn pink as her mother continued talking.

"M-mom! You're making it sound like, like..." Serena began to stutter, as her eyes nervously moved back and forth between Ash and the Pokegear's screen, much to Ash's confusion.

Grace, however, appeared to be amused at her daughter's reaction. "Like what, sweetheart?" she asked, feigning confusion, before deciding to be merciful and change the topic. "Anyway, how is Tandor? Are you enjoying the journey? Did you take part in any contest already?"

"Tandor's been nothing but great so far, and yes, we're having a good time exploring this region. I only took part in a contest and I didn't win, but there are many more to come," Serena replied.

"It's okay, sweetie. Falling down doesn't matter, what matter is-"

"... geting up and keep going forward, no matter what," Serena finished.

Grace nodded in approval. "If you stay on any path you choose, you will eventually reach your goal, no matter how many obstacles you find in your way."

"Thanks, mom," Serena smiled. "Oh, and I also caught two new Pokemon! I don't have them with me right now, but I'll show them to you later."

"By the way, where are you calling me from? You appear to be outside. You always call me from a Pokemon Center," Grace asked.

"Heh, my mom asked that too," Ash pointed out.

"We bought some Pokegears so we can call each other in case we're split," Serena explained. "And... to call home without having to go to a Pokemon Center."

Grace nodded in approval. "That's great to hear. In that case, I expect to hear more of you, honey."

"Y-Yeah. I'll call you again when I win my first Ribbon," Serena said.

"Understood. Have fun on your journey," Grace said, before her eyes turned towards Ash. "Oh, and Ash?"

"Yes, Mrs. Gabena?" Ash asked.

"I know you already did in Kalos, but I'm trusting Serena's well being to you. Make sure she's okay," Grace requested.

"Sure! You don't even need to ask!" Ash proudly declared. He then placed a hand on Serena's shoulder and pulled her towards him. Serena let a high pitched squeak, her face becoming redder, at Ash sudden and probably unintentional display of physical affection. "She'll be safe with me!"

Grace smiled at them. "That's what I wanted to hear. See you soon."

As Grace hanged the phone, the Pokegear's screen turned black. Ash let Serena go, and the girl let out a weary sigh.

"By the way, what was your mom talking about that got you so worked up?" Ash asked. "I wasn't quite following that part."

"Girl stuff, Ash. Don't sweat it," the honey blonde replied.

Thankfully, it appeared that such response was enough to curb Ash's curiosity, since the teen boy didn't press the issue. The two teens slipped into a comfortable silence as they enjoyed the view around them, with nothing but the chirps of the flying Birbies making any noise.

"Hey Ash," Serena began.

"Hm?"

"Do you think we should have told our moms about Team Omega?" Serena asked.

"What? No way!" Ash replied. "All it would have done is getting them worried about us. I mean, you heard your mom. Even she's worried about an accident that happened many years ago."

"I know, but still..." Serena began fidgeting with her fingers.

"Besides, we deal with Team Rocket on a regular basis during our journey through Kalos," Ash continued.

Serena shot him a flat look. "Ash, don't compare Team Rocket with these guys. Team Rocket might have given us a scare from time to time, but most of the time they were mostly nuisances. These guys have more in common with Team Flare, and you yourself saw how much harm those guys managed to do to Lumiose."

Of course he remembered. That incident was still rather fresh in his mind. While his mom had been worried about the incident, Ash had hidden from her how involved he had been.

"And we encountered and fought those guys many times before that, when they were trying to get their hands on Squishy," Serena continued.

"Okay, fair point," Ash conceded. "Though, these guys doesn't seem to be looking for a Legendary Pokemon to cause havoc or something like that."

"We don't know that," Serena rebutted. "Maybe they have plans to do that but that Zebos guy deleted them when he wiped out his base's servers."

"Alright, I get that those guys aren't Team Rocket," Ash conceded, holding his hands defensively. "But I still think we shouldn't worry our moms over that. Besides, I don't think we will encounter those criminals again."

Serena let out a mirthless chuckle. "Way to tempt fate there, Ash."

"You know what? Enough talking about criminals. Let's switch to a better topic," Ash stated. "For example, your contests."

"Very well," Serena agreed with the topic change, seeing that the talk about criminals wasn't getting them nowhere.

"So, do you plan to use Selkid and Minicorn anytime soon?" Ash inquired.

"I think Selkid's ready for the Appeal Round, so I'll use her next contest," Serena replied. "Mincorn needs a little more training and experience before I think in choosing her. I still don't even know what attacks can she use."

A knowing smile spread around Ash's face. "Well, there's a good way to know about that."

"Let me guess... a sparring match?" Serena asked, though she was also smiling back at him.

"You know me so well."

"Didn't we agree to give our Pokemon a free day to relax?" Serena reminded.

"I know, I know! I didn't mean right now," Ash explained, barely restraining his enthusiasm at the chance of seeing Serena's new Pokemon fighting for the first time. "We can do it after you're done with your contest, as training for the next one."

"Alrgh," Serena said, before she quickly added: "But no Dunsparce! At least not until you get him to behave!"

Ash wanted to defend his Pokemon, claiming he wasn't so bad, but he quickly remembered the cheap shot he delieverd to Selkid when she and Birbie where on their duet/singing duel, and that made him reconsider his position.

"Understood. I guess he still needs a little more discipline," Ash sheepishly stated. "At the very least, he follows my commands in battle, so there's that."

Serena gave him an odd look. "You talk as if you had Pokemon that disobeyed you in the past."

Given the sheer respect all the Pokemon Ash trained professed for their trainer, she found weird that there would be someone who wouldn't want to follow him.

"Only one, but he gave me quite a lot of trouble back then. You met my Charizard, right?" Ash asked.

Serena nodded. That was one of the many Pokemon of Ash she had met when they were in Pallet Town. It was a good thing that Ash never used him against her, because he appeared to be pretty strong. "I do. Though, despite his appearance, he was rather kind."

"Let's say Charizard wasn't always like that. He was always obedient when he was a Charmander, but then he evolved into Charmeleon, and stopped listening to me. He even attacked me sometimes. And it got worse when he evolved again into Charizard."

"Honestly, I just can't picture a Pokemon disobeying you. I see the way your Pokemon act when you send them to battle. The trust you inspire in them is palpable," Serena praised.

"Hehe, thanks," Ash said, blushing a little, and rubbing the back of his head. "Though, keep in mind that when I met you in Kalos, I was a very experienced trainer. Back then, I was still learning the ropes about Pokemon training, and I made lots of mistakes."

"Don't feel bad about that. We all make mistakes, especially when we do something for the first time," Serena reassured him.

"Oh, I know that. No other Pokemon has disobeyed me since then," Ash continued, now more cheerful. "And I'm sure Dunsparce won't disobey me either. He might be a scoundrel, but he respects me. Or at least, that's what I like to think."

"Congratulations for being the only living being that yellow snake respects," Serena said, rolling her eyes a little.

"Don't worry, sooner or later I'll get through him and make him realize the error of his ways," Ash said. "You'll see how, little by little, he'll become a better Pokemon."

"I don't doubt your word. But until that happens, make sure he doesn't cause more trouble and learns to respect our other Pokémon," Serena requested.

"Guess you have a reason to ask that," Ash conceded. "No problem. I mean, Dunsparce isn't the only newbie in my team. Colarva needs to catch up to the others, and Birbie still has much training to do as well. And while it may be too soon to tell about Colarva, you saw that Birbie has a very pleasant disposition."

"Indeed. No wonder Dunsparce can't stand him," Serena laughed.

"I think he also hates that Birbie beat him," Ash added. "Not helped that Birbie doesn't seem to appreciate his attitude either."

"Because Birbie is a decent Pokemon," Serena replied. She then looked at the time, and realized that it would be soon time to have lunch. "Well, now that we bought the Pokegears and tested them, shall we return to the Pokemon Center? I'm sure Clemont and Bonnie want theirs too."

"Yeah, let's go back," Ash said, as he and Serena got up from the bench and began walking.

...

A few minutes later, Ash and Serena returned to the Pokemon Center. Clemont was still working on the Team Omega electronic helmet, and they presumed Bonnie was outside, playing with the Pokemon. Upon calling both siblings, Ash and Serena gave the other two Pokegears to Clemont and Bonnie, who quickly took them out of their boxes and put them on their wrists. Bonnie in particular was looking at the device with stars in her eyes.

"Thank you guys!" Bonnie excitedly shouted. "I never had something like this before! It's so cool, right Dedenne?"

"Nene!" the Antennae Pokemon agreed, even if he had no idea what Bonnie was talking about.

"You know, Clemont thought that he could build some communicators based on that helmet," Bonnie pointed out. "But I'm not going to wear something Clemont built next to my ear, you know, if it goes BOOM!"

"Not everything I build explodes, Bonnie," Clemont protested, indignant. He then looked at the helmet, still on the table. "Though, better use Pokegears for the time being. If I use this technology to create communication devices, those Team Omega guys might be able to track us down."

"Can't they track us now?" Serena asked, worried after hearing such bit of information.

"Only when the communicator function is active, and I made sure to disable it," Clemont reassured her.

"Yeah, after the number we did on that base of theirs, I'm sure they'd want to get some revenge on us," Ash said, though he wasn't particularly frightened by such prospect. "Have you found something digging on that helmet?"

"Just bits and pieces here and there," Clemont said, as his eyes returned to the screen. "I was downloading as much information as I could from their servers, but the sudden wipeout caused many files to download corrupted or incomplete. Aside from dealings with other criminals, plans for future inventions.

"However, something I found something called 'Project 092' that gets mentioned quite a lot of times, and it appears to be important," Clemont said. "Unfortunately, this is the only thing I could get:"

Report #01 : Prog - is - - - -dename 092. - - - from radiation-s biofiber. It - - to reconstru- - - damage-

Report #02 : - power core - from over-. It - - a large - - nuclear fuel to -. - - activated- - - - prod- - limitless energy.

Report #03 : Th - MRI - anomalous brainwave -ns. - specim-n - - inca-e - indep-ent thoug-. We - -ing - - suppress-.

Report #04 : - - the Interface - final- today. Th- -erator - - - - - full control - -e Sp-cimen. - chief reseacher, Dr. - -s - granted clearance.

Report #05 : - has been - breach - confidential-. - - - shall - relocate - undergr- -. Project 092 - have - - -rminated.

Ash, Serena and Bonnie read the pieces of text on the screen, the former two with far more interest than the latter. Given how many words and letters were missing, they couldn't form a picture of what this project was or what was Team Omega attempting to do. Still, the words "radiation", "nuclear fuel" and "limitless energy" stood up.

"That... it looks that those Omega guys have their hands on something bigger than mere trafficking," Serena said, covering her mouth with her hands.

"Indeed," Clemont nodded, and continued to type. "Alright, I just sent this information to the Ranger HQ. Hopefully it will help them shut down Team Omega for good."

"Yeah. Between this and what we did before, those guys' criminal activities have their days numbered," Ash said, placing a reassuring hand on Serena.

Serena smiled, and grabbed his hand. "Of course," the honey blonde began. "I'm sure the Rangers will deal with them in no time."

Author's Note: After two gym battles followed by an action heavy chapter involving a villanous team, I think we all needed a chapter like this one, don't we?

Though, even if the chapter was short and more on the calm side, it wasn't entirely uneventful. Aside from more amour moments (which I'm sure you'll appreciate) we have the grpup introducing the new Pokemon to their teams (and Eevee quickly setting his sights on Sylveon) Ash and Serena calling their respective moms on their brand new Pokegears (sorry, I'm not fond of the Rotom phones) and Clemont cracking some information on Team Omega from the helmet he snatched the last chapter.

If you have played the game you'll find those entries familiar, though you don't find them until much later. Still, I decided to move them here for pacing reasons. For those of you who mentioned that the Pokemon trafficking was just for money, you were right, since as you can see, Team Omega had their noses into bigger stuff. And like I said before, Team Omega aren't filler villains, and these incomplete entries are only the first hint that shows how deep they have their hands into the actual plot.

Next chapter, the group returns to Moki Town and Serena will try to get her hands on her first contest ribbon. Will the second time be the charm? In the meantime, don't forget to leave a review with your thoughts on this chapter. Your reviews mean a lot to me.

Second Try for Victory!

Chapter 11:

Second Try for Victory!

Moki Town

The group had returned to Moki Town with a day to spare before the contest would take place. Naturally, they were using that day to help Serena prepare for said contest. The entire group was on the Center's adjacent battleground, watching Serena train with Selkid. Her other Pokemon were also out, watching her.

Thankfully, the Pokemon Center wasn't very crowded, so they had no problem using the battleground. They knew more people would arrive as the day went by, and by the next morning, the Center would be as crowded as when they first arrived to Kevlar Town.

"Alright Selkid, one more time, Sing!" Serena ordered.

The Sea Nymph Pokemon opened her mouth, and began to sing a beautiful and soft melody. Ethereal music notes of many colors started to appear around the area, drifting around slowly like clouds on a calm day. Eventually, Selkid's voice gave out, and the Water and Fairy type Pokemon's song was interrupted by a pair of high pitched coughs.

"Very well, Selkid!" Serena praised.

"Braix!" Braixen added, smiling at the smaller Pokemon.

Every time Selkid sang, she made a conscious effort to increase her range and timbre a little more. While her progress was slow, it was still progress.

"Selkid's singing is getting really good," Bonnie praised the Pokemon. "But will it be enough to win the judge's approval?"

"Selkid isn't just going to sing. But that's the hardest part, that's why we're making more emphasis on that," Serena explained. Upon seeing Bonnie's quizzical look, she smiled and added: "You'll see when the contest begins."

"Do you think it's safe to use Selkid so soon?" Clemont asked, adjusting his glasses. "This is only your second contest, and you only got Selkid very recently."

"I know, but the sooner Selkid and Minicorn gain experience by taking part in contests, the better, and I trust Selkid to help us win" Serena argued. "And even if we don't, the Contest Season has barely begun. We'll have much more chances afterwards."

Indeed, the only reason Serena hasn't used Minicorn just yet is because she barely had the chance to train her.

"So, you have Selkid for the Appeals. Have you thought of who you are going to use for the Contest battle?" Ash asked.

"I promised Pancham that I'd use him for the second contest," Serena said, looking at the Playful Pokemon.

"Cham!" Pancham proudly said, puffing his chest out. He clearly couldn't wait to show the public what he was capable of.

"Say, Serena, how about a sparring match with Pancham, to make sure he's ready to fight?" Ash suggested. "I think I could-"

"Oh, the battleground is already being used," a new voice said, a voice all of them had heard before. "Hey, it's you guys!"

The group turned around, and saw a smiling boy with brown hair.

"Vitor!" they all said in unison, as they went to greet the boy.

"Heh, I should have expected to find you here," Serena said. "I guess you're here for the contest too."

"Indeed. Guess I should have expected to see you here as well, given how close this is from Kevlar Town," Vitor pointed out.

"How about that Sayaka girl? Have you seen her too?" Serena asked, as she gripped her blue ribbon while her rival's name left her lips.

"No, I haven't," Vitor said, as he scratched the back of his head. "Maybe since she won a ribbon so early, she's taking it easy and is skipping this contest."

"I find that unlikely," Serena muttered.

"Hey, the less competition, the better, right?" Bonnie asked. "Especially if the competition is that good."

"Maybe. But competition isn't good if your rivals aren't up to par," Ash intervened. "I wouldn't like to win a league if all my rivals were poor trainers."

"Yeah. If we're aiming to become Top Coordinators, we can't just hope for our tougher rivals to simply disappear," Serena continued, before her eyes burned with resolve. "Besides, I'm not afraid of her. I want to face her again and show her that all the horrible things she said were wrong!"

Vitor raised an eyebrow. "Horrible things?"

"I'll tell you later," Serena said. She didn't feel like spoiling her mood reliving that moment. Not when she had a contest so soon.

"Well, I do have a bone to pick her too," Vitor pointed out. "I'm not a sore loser, but she wasn't exactly a graceful winner."

"Yeah. It would be great if either of you knocked that stuck-up ninja down a peg," Bonnie said, seething a little at the memory of

Sayaka's haughty personality.

Vitor's face lighted up as if he remembered something, and looked at Ash. "Oh, by the way, I got a call from my sister! She told me that, if I saw you guys before her, to tell you that she defeated Maria and earned her first badge."

"Really? That's great!" Ash cheered.

"Indeed. Maria was a very skilled trainer. Even if the Pokemon she used against Natalie weren't as strong as those she used against Ash, beating her must have been quite the ordeal," Clemont pointed out.

"And she wasn't the only one who beat Maria!" yet another voice said. "I got a call from Theo. He also defeated Maria, and plans to challenge another gym leader as soon as possible."

All the teens turned around, and saw no other than Professor Bamb'o, who entered the battleground as well.

"Hey, Professor!" Ash greeted him. "Not to sound rude, but what are you doing here?"

"I was hoping to find you guys, given that there's going to be a contest soon," Bamb'o said. "And tell you that I'm going to be a special judge!"

"Really? Great!" Vitor cheered.

"Yes, I'm so glad that you find my already huge workload getting even bigger with this kind of requests something great," Bamb'o nonchalantly said, making the others wondering if his complaint was serious or a joke. "Though, don't you guys think that I'm going to be biased towards you because I already know you!"

"I'll never ask you to do something like that," Vitor said, raising his hands defensively.

"Yeah! I was doing one last bit of training before tomorrow," Serena said. She then looked at her Pokemon, and beamed with pride. "My Pokemon's performance will leave your mouth agape."

"Heh, I have no doubt that-" Bamb'o began, before he did a double take, adjusting his sunglasses. "Wait, is that a Selkid? And a Minicorn? Are they yours?"

"Y-Yes?" Serena replied, feeling uncomfortable at the attention Bamb'o was giving her two newest captures.

"Whoa! Those Pokemon are super rare! And Selkid aren't even native to this area!" Bamb'o said, as he got closer to the two Pokemon. Selkid whimpered and hid behind Serena's leg, while Minicorn shot the researcher a meaning look. "So I imagine that you didn't get them from those traffickers that the news are talking about, not that you look like the type to do that. But that only makes me more curious of where did you find them. "

"Uh..." Serena stammered, before she looked at Ash and Clemont, silently asking for help. Ash and Clemont both nodded, the honey blonde understanding what they meant. "Well, the truth is..."

Serena told Bamb'o and Vitor the truth about them, recounting their encounter with Maury, followed by their raid on the Team Omega base, with the aid of the Dunsparce Gang. When she was done, Vitor was looking at them in amazement, and Bamb'o let out a whistle.

"Boy, you guys just arrived in Tandor, and help dismantle a gang of traffickers. One that the Rangers have been looking for months!" Bamb'o said in amazement. "Then again, given what Professor Oak told me about what you guys did in Kalos, I shouldn't be surprised."

"Yeah. I don't know why or how, but trouble seems to have a knack for us," Ash sheepishly said, rubbing the back of his head.

"Hey, at least plenty of good came out of this," Bamb'o said.

Then, after a moment of silence, Serena remembered something Vitor said just as he entered the battleground. "By the way, Vitor, given what you said before, you wanted to use the battleground to train, right?"

"Yeah. I also wanted to do some last minute training as well. I have a new a Pokemon I want to use for tomorrow's contest, and he needs all the training he can get," Vitor explained.

"Then you can use the battleground. I think I hogged it long enough," Serena offered.

"Are you sure? This is big enough for the two of us to share," Vitor said.

Serena smiled knowingly. "Yes. But you won't want me to see your performance routines and battle strategies, right?"

Vitor slightly reddened in embarrassment, realizing the two-way implications of Serena's words. "O-Of course not. Thanks a lot for your generosity."

Serena nodded. "Come on. I think we can find another place to train. See you tomorrow, guys!"

"See you in the contest!" Bamb'o said, waving them as they left. "Maybe I should leave too, or else you won't be able to surprise me tomorrow with whatever you have planned!" the professor said, before vacating the battleground as well.

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The day of the Pokemon Contest finally arrived, and, as expected, the normally quiet Moki Town was flooded by a wave of people, a minority being those who wanted to take part in the contest, as well as their friends and family who wanted to see them, and contest enthusiasts from neighboring towns and cities who wanted to watch the contest live.

They got up early and had breakfast. They tried to look for Vitor in the cafeteria, but they found no trace of him. Either he was still asleep, or maybe he had already left. Once they had their bellies full, they exited the Pokemon Center and headed towards the Contest Hall.

Unfortunately, they didn't get up early enough to avoid a large line of people who wanted to enter. Ash, Clemont and Bonnie sighed in exasperation.

"Well... I guess that this is where we part ways. I'm sorry I can't stay with you to make you company," Serena apologized.

"Eh, it's okay, this is nothing new for us," Ash said, dismissing Serena's concern with a handwave. "Better get going so you have enough time to get ready."

"Hopefully we'll get some good seats this time around," Clemont added.

Serena waved them goodbye, and walked towards the coordinator's entrance. After showing her Contest Pass to the security guard in front of the door, a worker there pointed out where the changing room and the waiting area was. Getting into the changing room, she quickly changed into her contest dress, and headed to the waiting area.

As expected, many coordinators were already there, waiting for the contest to begin. Serena quickly saw Vitor, already in his vintage admiral outfit. She smiled and walked towards him.

"Vitor!" she called.

The younger boy turned around, and smiled back at Serena.

"Hey, there you are!" Vitor greeted her.

"Heh, you arrived here earlier than me. And here I thought that we got up early," Serena said.

"Well... there was only one bathroom in our house, and both Natalie and I always fight to see who gets to use it first in the morning, since we like our long showers, so we try to get up before the other," Vitor explained, chuckling a little. "Getting up early is nothing new to me."

"Speaking of Natalie, do you know if she's going to come to see you?" Serena asked. "Nowtoch City isn't that far away from here," Serena said.

"She wanted to, but she took too long to beat Maria. You know how it goes, catching new Pokemon, training them..." he began. "Not that I blame her, I don't expect her to be here to watch all my contests, just like how I'm not going to watch all her gym battles."

"Fair enough," Serena conceded.

"I mean, we all knew this when we decided to travel on our own," Vitor said.

"Now that you mention it... I don't have siblings, so I don't know how you two must feel but... don't you miss her a little?" Serena asked.

"Yeah. I mean, of course I do, but it's only natural. She may be my twin, we had shared a lot of our lives with each other, but that doesn't mean there wasn't a moment where we were going to follow our own path away from the other," Vitor continued.

Serena nodded. "Guess that makes sense."

There was a moment of silence, and the two of them wordlessly acknowledged that the topic had reached its end. As the waiting area began to slowly fill with coordinators already on their outfits, Vitor began to look around.

"I was expecting Sayaka to show up, but I haven't seen her so far. It seems that she did skip this contest," the brown haired boy pointed out.

While she wasn't proud of such a reaction, Serena was inwardly glad that the ninja wasn't here this time around. She knew that she still had a long way to go before she could match Sayaka's skill. For as much as she itched for a rematch, she knew she and her Pokémon needed to get ready to avoid a repeat of their previous battle

" Maybe I'm not ready to defeat Sayaka just yet, but if I keep training hard, I'll be able to," Serena inwardly told herself.

Serena remembered Sawyer. When they first met him, the gap between him and Ash was so big it was almost comical. At first, Ash defeated him with almost insulting ease. Then, Ash had to work a little more for each of his victories over the short green haired boy. Until one day, Sawyer finally beat Ash. Sure, Ash had trouble with Greninja's Battle Bond, but it's not that Ash had needed it to defeat Sawyer before.

Then, when they battled for the last time in the Kalos League, Sawyer proved to be Ash's equal, pushing the older boy to his very limit. And even if Ash won at the end, Serena admitted there were moments when she feared that Sawyer might have been the victor.

As the last few coordinators filled the room, all that was left was counting down the minutes until the contest finally begun.

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Despite the rather big line, Ash, Clemont and Bonnie managed to get pretty good seats. It wasn't first row, but it was close enough to the arena so Serena could see them if she looked in their direction.

"It's starting!" Bonnie cheered, as Jillian walked into the performance area. The murmurs and humming of the public died down as the

spotlight focused on her. Meanwhile, the three judges took their seats.

"Ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to the Moki Town Pokemon Contest! I'm your host, Jillian Meridian!" she began, and the crowd exploded into loud cheers. "Thank you! Also give a warm welcome to the judges that will evaluate our wonderful coordinators: Moki Town's own Nurse Joy, the Venesi City Gym Leader Rosalind, and the S-Class Connoisseur Ambrose Reigns!"

People began to applaud and cheer, though Ash couldn't help but notice that many people also booed when Jillian mentioned Ambrose's name. Not that Ash thought that the caustic judge didn't deserve the boos. Though, given how the man was looking at the public as if they were garbage under his shoes, he didn't seem to care.

"And our special judge, Moki Town's own Professor Bamb'o!" Jillian added, before motioning to the shades-wearing man, sitting next to Ambrose. People cheered even louder than before, probably happy than one of their townspeople was getting the spotlight.

"Thank you! I'm looking forward seeing what these coordinators have to offer!" Bamb'o said.

Jillian then went to explain the rules of the Pokemon Contests for those in the public not aware of them, and then showed the ribbon the contest winner would take with him or her, finishing off with introducing the very first contestant, beginning the Appeal Round.

Coordinators walked in and out of the arena one after the other, their Pokemon doing all sort of tricks, light shows, dances and acrobatics. Some where good, others not so much. Rosalind and Nurse Joy often passed a positive judgement, while Ambrose completely tore down the coordinators' display with brutal verbal beatdowns. Even if the shock vale was lost after the first contest, his harsh words drew more than one coordinator to tears.

"Let's welcome with a big applause to our next coordinator! From this very Town, Vitor Raine!" Jillian said, as the brown haired boy walked into the stage.

Picking up a pokeball, he tossed it into the air. "Eletux, come out and play!"

Vitor's starter emerged from the pokeball among a storm of yellow lightning bolts.

"Let's begin! Eletux, Ice Beam!" Vitor called. "Just as we practiced!"

"Tux!" the Hippocampus Pokemon happily cried, and began to fire an Ice Beam around him.

The glowing white beam began to form a trail of ice of irregular height, in some cases even forming a loop. Soon they realized that it appeared to be some kind of rollercoaster. It ended on a ramp that moved upwards.

"Look at that folks! A rollercoaster made of ice!" Jillian commented.

Ash remembered seeing Dawn using a similar trick during the Sinnoh Grand Festival with Buneary and Quilava. She wondered what Dawn would say if he saw somebody doing something so similar. Given that contests are televised, did Vitor watch Dawn during the Grand Festival?

"Now, Eletux, run across the ice with Aqua Jet!" Vitor commanded.

Eletux jumped onto the ice path, and began to run. As his feet stopped touching the ice, he was coated in a cloak of water, and dashed over the ice like a rocket, raising a trail of snowy powder which sparkled under the light of the spotlight, creating a rather beautiful effect. Eventually, Eletux reached the end of the rollercoaster, and thanks to the final upwards ramp, he shot into the air.

"Now, Eletux, use Charge Beam on the ice!" Vitor shouted.

The watery cloak around Eletux disappeared, and Eletux, still mid air, moved his body so his head would be facing downwards. The bulb of his longest tail began to glow with a yellow light and crackle with sparks of the same color, before he fired from there a single yellow bolt of electricity. The lightning bolt hit the ice rollercoaster, which shattered into thousands of ice shards that crackled with electricity, producing yet another amazing visual effect.

"And finish!" Vitor said, just as Eletux landed on all four on the ground. Both trainer and Pokemon beamed with pride as the public erupted into cheers, and began applauding him.

"What a great performance, folks! Let's see what our judges have to say!" Jillian said, as she motioned to the judge panel.

"An amazing performance. Not only it was a delight to see, but Eletux also seemed to be having a great time!" the blue-haired Nurse Joy said, much to Vitor's delight.

"Veramente, one of the best performances I've seen today!" Rosalind said, in a similar mood.

"There were so many sparkles, I was almost blinded. But for the positives, I didn't have to submit my eyes to this awful performance in full," Ambrose deadpanned.

"Don't listen to the sourpuss, Vitor! I think you did an amazing job!" Bamb'o said, earning a glare from Ambrose. "I still remember when I gave you that Eletux, and I can see how much has grown thanks to your training!"

It didn't take much effort for Vitor to ignore the caustic judge's opinion, especially with Bamb'o's encouragement. He then returned Eletux to his pokeball, made a polite bow, and walked away, as the public clapped enthusiastically. As he left the stage, Jillian announced the next coordinator.

"That was a pretty good performance he did there," Clemont pointed out. "He must have been trying a lot since the Kevlar Town Contest."

"His first performance wasn't exactly bad either," Ash said, remembered the tricks Vitor's Pahar did with Will-O-Wisp.

"Pika," Pikachu nodded in agreement.

"Then again, I'm sure not even he can beat Serena's experience," Bonnie said, her faith in Serena unwavering.

More coordinators walked in and out of the stage, drawing mostly positive judgement from Bamb'o, Nurse Joy and Rosalind, and absurdly negative comments from Ambrose.

"And now, let's welcome our next coordinator! From Vaniville Town in Kalos, Serena!" Jillian announced.

Serena walked into the stage, waving at the public. Ash, Clemont and Bonnie clapped and cheered the loudest, which caused the honey blonde to see them. She beamed and waved at them as well.

"Look, she saw us! She saw us!" Bonnie yelled. "Go Serena! You can do it!"

"Selkid, go!" Serena said, tossing the pokeball into the air.

The capture device opened, releasing Selkid among a flurry of blue bubbles, that went up into the air before popping.

"Sel, selkid!" Selkid cried. The public roared upon seeing her, which caused her to flinch. It was the first time Selkid had seen so many humans in a single spot. Looking back at Serena, the trainer smiled and gave Selkid a thumbs up. This seemed to calm Selkid somehow. "Are you ready, Selkid?"

Not wanting to disappoint her trainer, Selkid put on a brave face and nodded. "Sel!"

"Good! Then, leave them everybody amazed with your Sing!"

Selkid nodded, closing her eyes in order to push the public out of her mind, and began to sing. As her melody began, ethereal musical notes of different colors began to float around the stage.

Selkid were known for their beautiful voices, and given their rarity, the public quickly grew silent so nobody could miss such an opportunity. And indeed, judging by their faces, Selkid's song was meeting their expectations. Serena glanced that the judge panel: Nurse Joy and Rosalind leaned forward expectantly, while Ambrose looked at Selkid with an eyebrow raised and a flat look, as if wondering if that was all what Serena planned to do.

And she was going to show him that it wasn't. "Very well, Selkid! Now, Water Pulse into the air!"

Without stopping her song, Selkid opened her eyes and brought her arms together, and summoned an orb of water. Once the orb was big enough, she tossed it into the air. As it flew upwards, the sphere of water absorbed some of the musical notes inside it.

"Now, Hyper Voice!"

Selkid's song changed into a high pitched cry, releasing a stream of sonic waves upwards, in the same direction of the Water Pulse, which was now falling back down. The sphere of water crashed against the sonic waves, causing the former to explode into rings of water that spreaded outwards, before dissolving even further into tiny drops of water that glittered under the light of the spotlights. The notes inside the sphere also exploded, resulting in echoes of Selkid's song, making it sound like backup singers.

"And done!" Serena said. The crowd cheered loudly, causing Selkid to flinch again. Not wanting to push Selkid further, she returned her Pokemon to her pokeball.

"An amazing spectacle involving both sound and visuals!" Jillian praised, before she motioned to the judge panel. "Let's see what our judges have to say about it!"

"Selkid's song alone was a delight to watch, but the way it was followed by that combination of Water Pulse and Hyper Voice was simply sublime!" Nurse Joy beamed.

"As somebody who already heard Selkid singing, yours was simply magnifico!" Rosalind said.

"Maybe you could have your Selkid shatter some glasses with her voice. I mean, she was this close to shatter my eardrums," Ambrose complained. "So please, next time you plan to torture us with another concert, give your Selkid singing lessons."

"Can somebody tell me why did they hire this guy?" Bamb'o said, pointing at Ambrose. "Because I have a hard time believing we saw the same performance! Your Selkid was simply amazing! Anybody can get their hands on a rare Pokemon, but only a truly skilled trainer can bring a Pokemon's whole potential out, and in your case, I can see that you're doing a good job with her!"

Serena didn't regret recalling Selkid when she did; while she could ignore Ambrose's cutting words, her poor Selkid might have taken them much worse, even with Bamb'o softening the blow. After all, Serena still remembered how she felt when she heard the connoisseur's judgement the first time.

Serena muttered a "thanks", made a slight bow, and returned to the waiting area.

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Serena returned to the waiting area, where the rest of the coordinators were. As she entered, another one walked towards the stage, a girl older than her that she had never seen before. Unlike the previous contest, where she was the first, this time she was

among the last. Only a few coordinators were left to perform before the results of the Appeal Round were in.

"Hey, Serena!" Vitor called, waving at her. She walked towards him. "Pretty good show! Your Selkid has an amazing voice!"

"Thanks. I only had Selkid for a short time, so I didn't have much time to train her. I know Selkid's strongest point is their voices, so I decided to go with that," Serena explained. Then, she smiled and added: "Though, your performance was nothing to scoff at. It was really good."

"To be fair, the idea wasn't mine. I saw it on TV some time ago," Vitor admitted, rubbing his arm sheepishly. "Naturally, I added my own edge to it, even if I used it as a base."

"Hey, coming up with performing routines is hard. Especially for new coordinators who didn't have the chance to catch many Pokemon and train them," Serena defended him. "I'm sure that, once you catch more Pokemon, train more, and acquire more experience, you'll amaze people with performances never seen before."

"You think so?" the boy asked.

"Sure! I can see you have a lot of potential," Serena assured.

Vitor let out a content sigh, and smiled. "Well, coming from a veteran like you... that means a lot."

The two fell into a comfortable silence. Wordlessly, their eyes drifted towards one of the monitors hanging above them, showing a coordinator who had just finished her display. While Nurse Joy, Professor Bamb'o and Rosalind praised her and her Owten, Ambrose tore them down with a savage critic.

"Okay, what's the deal with that guy?" Serena asked, as her brow furrowed. "Has he ever passed a positive judgement? It seems like everything every coordinator does disgusts him."

"No idea. The judges on the contests I watched on TV tended to be more fair and inclined to praise," Vitor commented. "Maybe they included him because people enjoy the way he tears down the contestants. I heard caustic critics are all the rage these days."

Serena crossed her arms, and scowled. "That's not a good reason to let this happen. Everyone is here to make the crowd enjoy the show, and all his scathing criticism is doing is making Coordinators and Pokémon question themselves and feel bad for their hard work."

"Though maybe..." Vitor began, but didn't finish what he was saying.

Serena looked at him, and raised an eyebrow. "Maybe what?"

"Well... it's kind of silly," Vitor admitted. "But maybe he's some kind of secret test. Like, if somebody's able to get a positive reaction out of that guy, there's a secret prize or something."

"I find that unlikely," Serena said, her eyes glaring daggers on the screen displaying Ambrose. "Though, coming up with a performance so good he has nothing negative to say even if he wants to sounds like a promising challenge."

Yes. She will always remember how Ambrose nearly broke her during her first performance. In turn, Serena would do such an amazing, jaw-dropping performance she would make him eat every word he had said.

Time passed, and the few remaining coordinators completed the Appeal Round.

"And thus the Appeal Round comes to a close!" Jillian announced. "The judges have already cast their evaluation and score of each coordinator. Now, the eight coordinators that will move to the next phase will appear on the screen!"

Everybody held their breath as their one by one, the faces of the eight finalists appeared on the screen. Serena was among the first to

let out a sigh of relief, being no less than second, with Vitor on fourth place. Once all eight finalists had been revealed, the rest of the contestants either sighed in relief, or groaned loudly, lamenting having been eliminated already.

"We both have passed!" Vitor cheered.

"Indeed we did! Though, with that display of yours, it'd be a crime if you didn't," Serena said.

...

Meanwhile, back at the grandstands, Ash, Bonnie and Clemont had just seen the eight finalists appearing on the screen. Needless to say, they were overjoyed when they saw Serena's face, especially so soon.

"Serena passed! Serena passed! Look!" Bonnie bounced up and down, as she excitedly pointed at the big screen behind Jillian, that displayed the faces of the finalists.

Ash smiled. "Did you have any doubt?"

"Of course not!" Bonnie replied, almost indignant, before pouting a little and adding: "Though, I can't help but feel a little nervous when they're announcing the finalists."

"Like I said before, Serena is past the point of losing the Appeal Round. Not with her vast experience in Showcases helping her," Ash added.

"Now, let's see which opponent our talented coordinators will have to battle against!" Jillian said.

The eight portraits began to shuffle for a few seconds, before they were paired up. Vitor was on the second bracket, and Serena was on the third. They wouldn't fight unless the two of them made it to the finals.

"Well, it would be a bummer if Serena and Vitor had to fight each other from the get go," Clemont pointed out.

"Not that it would change anything, since Serena is going to win this easily!" Bonnie claimed.

"Nenene!" Dedenne agreed.

And indeed, Serena didn't have much trouble reaching the finals. She first fought against a coordinator that used a Felunge. Aside from type disadvantage, this Felunge was nowhere near as well trained as Maria's, and quickly fell to Pancham's might. In the semifinals, Serena had to face a coordinator with an Owten, which gave Serena more trouble, but in the end the Kalosian girl and her Pancham rose the victors.

Vitor's first fight was against a coordinator with a Buizel. A point of interest is that it allowed them to see a new Pokemon Vitor had caught.

"Come out and play, Leafeon!" Vitor said, releasing his newest Pokemon.

The coordinator with the Buizel flinched. It was obvious he was banking on the opponent not using a Pokemon with type advantage. And as many people predicted, Vitor's Leafeon won the match. Following that, Vitor had to face a girl with a Barewl. The Barewl proved to be a resilient opponent -the memory of fighting them in large numbers in Passage Cave was still fresh Ash's mind- though in the end Vitor won because Leafeon's attacks were far more visually stunning, and when the buzzer rang, he had more points than her.

...

Back on the waiting area, Serena heard Jillian announce a small reprieve of ten minutes before the final battle could take place. The honey blonde watched Vitor entering the waiting area, as he removed his tricorn in order to wipe some sweat from his forehead.

"Hey there," Serena greeted him upon entering the waiting area.
"Nice victory."

"Thanks. Though, I had to work much harder for this one than for the first one," Vitor admitted. Then he looked at Serena, and added:
"And I will have to work even harder if I want to win the final battle."

Serena smiled at the unsaid compliment. "I'm sure you'll do great, That Leafeon is strong and well trained, especially for a Pokemon you haven't have for a long time."

"Heh, if you think so," Vitor said, as he pulled out Leafeon's pokeball and stared at it intently. "Hopefully he'll be good enough to beat your Pancham."

"At the very least, he's good enough to carry you to the finals. That's not something to scoff at," Serena pointed out.

"I guess not," Vitor agreed.

The ten minutes passed much faster than either of them realized. A staff member entered through a back door, and told the two remaining coordinators that it was time for the final contest battle. They nodded and walked towards the room's main exit.

"Well, time to battle. I never had the chance to battle you the previous contest, given that that ninja girl kicked me out in the semifinals," Vitor commented.

"I would have loved to fight you too. I'm grateful for this chance," Serena replied, smiling.

"Good luck," he said.

"Good luck to you too," she replied. "May the best coordinator win."

...

"There they are!" Bonnie shouted, as she watched Serena and Vitor walking into the battleground. The two of them went to occupy the spots at the opposite sides of the arena. Bonnie jumped from her seat and began to wave at her. "Come on Serena! You can win this!"

"We're all rooting for you!" Ash added.

"Now, the moment you have been waiting for!" Jillian excitedly announced. "The Moki Town Contest final battle! On one side, we have Serena, from Vaniville Town, Kalos!"

The public cheered, Ash, Clemont and Bonnie being the loudest. Pikachu and Dedenne cheered as well.

"And on the other side, from Moki Town itself, Vitor!" Jillian continued.

The public's roar was way louder than what Serena got. Ash imagined that, being from Moki Town, more people were rooting for him to win.

"Coordinators, present your Pokemon!"

"Leafeon, come out and play!" Vitor said, tossing a pokeball.

The capture device opened, releasing a storm of green leaves and flower petals of many colors. The petals and leaves merged into a single, large flower, before it burst into a thousand bits of light, revealing Leafeon.

"Pancham, go!" Serena said, mimicking her oponent.

Serena's pokeball released a flurry of golden stars, the Playful Pokemon appeared among them, and turning them into golden dust with well-aimed punches and kicks.

~Serena (Pancham) VS Vitor (Leafeon) ~

"The first move is ours! Pancham, begin with Stone Edge!" Serena commanded.

"Cham, pancham!" Pancham said, before slamming both paws into the ground, summoning a row of rising pillars of jagged blue rock towards Leafeon.

"Leafeon, jump over those rocks and use them to get close to Pancham!" Vitor ordered.

"Leaf!" Leafeon cried, as he did what was told. The moment the Rock-type move was about to reach him, he jumped above it, and landed on the top of a stone column just as it formed. Leafeon then began to hop from one column to another getting close to Pancham. "Now, Aerial Ace!"

The moment Leafeon was close to Pancham, he lunged towards the Kalosian Pokemon, his front paws glowing white. Serena, however, wasn't worried.

"Pancham, now!" Serena called.

Just as Leafeon was about to strike Pancham, another column of rock rose beneath Pancham's feet, launching him into the air, and taking Leafeon's attack instead. Leafeon cried in pain upon hitting the hard rock.

"It seemed that Serena had made a mistake, but it was a deliberate plan to lure Vitor in a trap!" Jillian commented. Vitor lost a tenth of his points.

"No!" Vitor cried as he watched his point counter go down.

"Heh, I remember that I used the same tactic with Greninja when I was sparring against her, and she came up with that way to counter it," Ash proudly said.

Clemont nodded. "All that training she had with you is bearing fruit!"

"Now Pancham, Dark Pulse!"

While he was still pushed into the air, Pancham shifted his body to face Leafeon, while cupping his small paws.

"CHAM!"

Pancham thrust his paws downwards, releasing a stream of pitch black energy with purple edges.

"Leafeon, use Magic Leaf on yourself!" Vitor replied.

"Leaf!" Leafeon said, as his body began to glow with a green light. Multiple leaves made of glowing green light formed around Leafeon, and began to spin around his body, forming a green spinning shield.

Pancham's Dark Pulse crashed against the spinning shield of leaves that protected the Verdant Pokemon, dispersing the attack into multiple threads of darkness. This caused Serena to lose five percent of her total points.

"Great!" Vitor cheered, having repelled the attack completely. "Now send those leaves to Pancham!"

The leaves stopped spinning around Leafeon, and flew towards Pancham, who was still falling down. The Palyful Pokemon was unable to do anything, and was peppered by a storm of green darts, making him cry in pain before he crashed on the ground. This made Serena lose an additional tenth of her points.

"Yes! We're back on top!" Vitor cheered, pumping his fist.

"Pancham, are you okay?" Serena asked, as she worriedly looking at the first Pokemon she ever caught.

While he had some cuts and his fur didn't look so good, Pancham quickly jumped to his feet, resolve burning in his eyes.

"Pancham!" he cried.

Serena sighed upon seeing that her Pokemon was okay, before she looked at the scoreboard, and scowled. *"I've been too careless. Vitor is a beginner but he's talented and learns fast. I need to be more careful,"* she thought.

"And with a very creative use of Magical Leaf, Vitor gains an advantage over Serena! Can Serena do something to turn the match around in her favor?" Jillian asked.

"Of course I will!" she replied, as if taking offense to such comment. "Pancham, Stone Edge again!"

"Cham!" Pancham said, slamming both paws into the ground.

Another row of blue stone columns emerged from the ground towards Leafeon. Without having to be told, Leafeon once again jumped over the rising stone pillars, and ran towards Pancham hopping from one to another. This maneuver costed Serena another bit of her score, though she had already predicted it.

"Leafeon, once you're close, use Energy Ball!" Vitor commanded. He knew what would happen if he used a close ranged attack again.

"Now, Pancham! Arm Thrust on the stone pillar!" Serena commanded.

Panchamp jumped forward, rearing one of his front paws back, which glowed with a white light as he closed it into a fist. He punched the stone pillar Leafeon was about to land on, shattering it completely. Leafeon cried, suddenly founding himself without footing, and pummeled to the ground among the pieces of shattered rock.

"Leafeon!" Vitor cried. He didn't notice how he lost another bit of his score, enough to put him under Serena's.

"And Serena succesfully bait Vitor by making him believe he was using the same tactic twice!" Jillian commented, seemingly charmed with Serena's move.

"Pancham, Thunder Punch!" Serena ordered.

"Cham!" Pancham jumped once again, and closed his front paw into a fist, which was quickly coated in electric yellow sparks.

"Leafeon, quickly, move!" Vitor asked.

Shaking the pain of the fall, Leafeon managed to get back to his feet, and jumped a couple meters aside just in time to dodge Pancham's electrified fist, which slammed into the ground, releasing a shower of yellow sparks in every direction. This made Serena lose even more points, putting them in the same spot as Vitor. By now, both of them have lost half their points.

"Leafeon, Aerial Ace!" Vitor ordered.

Knowing that Pancham couldn't avoid it with Stone Edge from that distance, Serena opted for the next best thing: "Pancham, block it with Arm Thrust!"

Leafeon leaped at Pancham, forelegs glowing with a white light, while Pancham curled his front paws into fists, also coated in a light of an identical color. Both Pokemon struck each other, the combined force of the blows pushing them backwards. Unfortunately for Serena, Pancham took the worst part of the attack, and was sent crashing on his back, while Leafeon merely skidded backwards.

Nervous, Serena took a moment to look at the scoreboard. Vitor was once again in the lead as she saw her points dropping to about forty percent, compared to Vitor's fifty. There was only a minute and a half remaining.

" *Did that much time pass already?*" Serena thought distressingly.

"Let's press our advantage, Leafeon! Energy Ball!" Vitor ordered.

"Leaf!" Leafeon cried as he opened his mouth, and formed a green and yellow sphere of power in front of it, before firing the projectile at

Pancham.

Serena was about to tell Pancham to counter it with Dark Pulse, but she had the feeling that was what Vitor was hoping she'd do, since the attack would leave Pancham wide open. However, as she wracked her brain over what she could do, she remembered something that happened during the fight with Maury, and realized that maybe she could use Vitor's tactic against him.

"Pancham, use Thunder Punch!" Serena ordered. "Punch in a straight line!"

"Pancham!" Pancham nodded, as he once again curled his paw into a fist before it began to glow with electric sparks.

Pancham thrust his electrified fist into the coming green and yellow projectile, and after a second of struggle, he managed to bounce it back at Leafeon. There was a collective gasp from the public.

"And look at that folks! Serena is able to send Vitor's attack back at him!" Jillian pointed out, followed by a cheer. Meanwhile, Vitor's points dropped so they were now equal to Serena's.

"Leafeon, counter the Energy Ball with Iron Tail!" Vitor managed to say, a little stunned to see that his strategy didn't work as intended.

Leafeon's long leaf-shaped tail glowed with a metallic sheen, and slammed it into the incoming projectile. The Energy Ball exploded, showering the area with beautiful shower of green and yellow sparkly bits of light. This made Serena lose another bit of point, which was now reduced to a third.

"Pancham, Dark Pulse now!" Serena cried.

When the sparkly bits dispelled completely, Vitor and Leafeon saw, much to their shock, that Pancham was firing yet another stream of black energy with purple edges towards the shocked Leafeon, which after using Iron Tail, was briefly wide open. However, that instant was

all what Serena and Pancham needed. The attack connected, blasting Leafeon backwards before engulfing Leafeon in a black and purple explosion. Vitor's points dropped.

"Yes! Direct hit!" Bonnie cheered from the stands.

BZZZZZZ!

"And time's out!" Jillian declared after the buzzer rang. "The winner of the Moki Town Contest is... !"

Both Serena and Vitor quickly turned their heads towards the scoreboard. Serena still had a third of her points. Vitor a little over a fourth.

"... Serena and her Pancham!" Jillian cried.

Serena and Pancham both gasped and looked at the scoreboard, which now changed to show Serena's picture next to a smaller one of Pancham's, with the word "WINNER!" written under it, almost as if still processing that they've won.

"We've won...?" she asked.

"Pancham, pan!" Pancham happily cried, leaping at Serena. The honey blonde yelped and barely caught the Playful Pokemon between her arms.

"We've won...? Yes, we've won! We did it, Pancham!" Serena cheered, lifting Pancham above her head while making a twirl.

Meanwhile, both Vitor and Leafeon sighed, the Verdant Pokemon lowering his head in shame. Vitor walked towards his Grass-type, and rubbed his neck.

"Hey, don't feel bad. You were amazing and did your best," the Moki Town boy reassured. "We'll do better the next time."

"Leaf..." Leafeon said, forcing himself to smile.

After celebrating it with Pancham, Serena walked towards Vitor. The boy straightened up a little, and cleared his throat.

"It was a really good match, Serena," he began, trying to sound polite. Serena could see that he was trying to suppress the bitter feeling of yet another defeat. He extended his hand.

"Congratulations."

Serena smiled, and took his hand. "It was a good match, indeed. There were many times I thought you were going to win. Your Leafeon is very well trained."

"Guess not good enough," he sadly said.

"Don't be discouraged. Nothing we do is pointless. If you keep training hard and persevere, there will be a time when you will reach your dreams," Serena assured him. "The road to victory is paved with defeats. That's something I had to learn as well."

"I... thank you. We will continue to train hard," Vitor stated. He then pulled out a pokeball, and returned Leafeon. "Come back Leafeon, take a rest."

A few minutes later, Serena was standing on a small podium, the four judges and Jillian next to her. Professor Bamb'o was holding an opened box with the Ribbon on it.

"A well earned victory, Serena," the professor said, allowing Serena to grab the ribbon inside it. "The Moki Ribbon is yours."

Almost trembling, Serena grabbed the ribbon. She looked at it for a moment, before rising it above her head. "Ta-da! I won my first ribbon!" she cheered, and the public broke into a loud applause.

"And thus, the Moki Town Contest comes to an end! I hope you have a great time, and see you next time!" Jillian said, officially ending the contest.

...

About half an hour later, the group was outside the Contest Hall, both Serena and Vitor already changed back into their usual clothes, and they were ready to continue their respective journeys.

"Once again, congratulations for your first ribbon, Serena," Vitor said.

"Thanks. And don't worry. I'm sure you'll win yours in no time," Serena reassured him.

"Yeah, I met quite a few novice coordinators. Winning the first ribbon is always the hardest, but all of them eventually got there," Ash added as well. "And you won't be any different from them."

"Let's hope you are right," he said, almost in a whisper. "So, what do you guys plan to do now?"

"We're heading east, to Burole Town, since Ash needs to fight for his second badge," Clemont answered.

"According to the Contest Schedule, there's going to be a contest on Burole Town soon, so you might kill two Birbie with one Rock Throw," Vitor told them.

"Really?" Serena asked. "In that case, maybe you could travel with us."

Vitor, however, shook his head. "Thanks for the offer, but I already have other plans. There's also going to be a second contest on Kevlar Town. I got a call from Natalie, and she asked me to meet her there so she can help me train."

"Oh. What a pity," Bonnie said.

"I see. In that case, I wish you luck in your next contest," Serena said. "Hopefully, once we face each other again, we'll both have more ribbons."

"Let's hope you're right," Vitor said, as he turned around and began to walk towards the west part of the town. "Until we meet again!"

They waved Vitor goodbye, as the group of four began to walk in the opposite direction.

"According to the map, we'll take a few days to reach Burole Town," Serena said, checking her tablet. "But there's still enough hours of sunlight to reach next Pokemon Center."

"In that case, let's not waste anymore time, and let's go!" Ash excitedly said.

And thus, the group said goodbye to Moki Town for the second and final time, as they headed towards the next stop in their journey.

Author's Note: And on her second try, Serena finally gets her first ribbon! Yay! Guess it helped that this time she didn't have to deal with such a hard rival like Sayaka. But Sayaka is an obstacle that she'll have overcome sooner or later.

Though, not that Vitor is an unworthy rival. Despite the fact that he's just starting out, he still managed to put quite the impressive show, and would have won the contest had his final opponent not be somebody as experienced as Serena. Once Vitor become more experienced, the gap between them will get progressively smaller.

Next chapter, our heroes head East, towards Burole Town. Until then, don't forget to leave a review with your thoughts on this chapter. Seeing your reviews mean a lot to me.

Thundering Clash in the Sand!

Chapter 12:

Thundering Clash in the Sand!

Route 3 - Seabreeze Way

It's been a couple days since the group had said goodbye to Moki Town, and continued their journey, now heading east, towards Burole Town.

The journey after leaving Moki was pleasant and uneventful. Like Lakeside View, Seabreeze Way was mostly a contrast of the greenery provided by vast expanses of grass, circumvented by trees, with the blue of many small lakes and streams. The sky was completely clear, the sun shining brightly without any cloud dampening its light. Even if the temperature was a little warmer than ideal, the weather was great to stay in the outdoors.

So far they didn't see any Pokemon that they hadn't seen before. All that they saw were Mankey fighting each other, Lotad waddling near the streams, Owten flying around the tree canopies and Feleng either lazying around or trying to find some food -though Bonnie swore to see a Buizel jumping from the surface of one of the streams. That's it, until Serena saw a new Pokemon she hadn't seen before.

"Hey, what's that?" Serena asked, pointing to a nearby cluster of bushes.

Following her direction, they saw a bunch of red and black insect-like Pokemon gathering berries.

"Well, there's one easy way to find the answer," Ash said, as he and Serena pulled out their Pokedex.

" Smore, the Cute Ant Pokemon. Bug . If a Smore approaches your picnic, it's not trying to steal your food, it just wants attention. Still, some people are afraid of them."

"Well, they really look cute," Bonnie said, as she hopped towards the group of Bug-types. "Hello there!"

"Nene!" Dedenne added, waving to them as well.

The bunch of Smore turned around at Bonnie, looked at her in alarm, and disappeared under the shrubbery with the berries they were collecting.

"Hey, where are you going?" Bonnie asked, pouting a little. "Come back, please!"

"It seems that those Smore were shy," Clemont began. "Or maybe they were afraid you were going to take their food away from them."

Bonnie crossed her arms, scowling. "I wasn't going to do that. Plus, the Pokedex made them look like they liked humans, but it lied to me."

As they continued walking, they could see that the greenery started to slowly fall back, replaced by more blue, this one belonging to the sea rather than rivers or lakes, as well as yellowish-white sand. They could also hear the racket of many people in the distance. The few trees they could see also changed, the oaks and pines being replaced by palm trees.

"Look! There's a beach over there!" Bonnie pointed out, visibly excited. "Let's make a stop here!"

"I'm with Bonnie. This could be a good place to stop and rest," Ash agreed, much to the blonde's joy.

"Yeah. I think we could also have lunch on the beach as well," Serena added.

"Well, looks like the majority has already spoken., so sure, why not?" Clemont asked.

"YAAAAY!" Bonnie cheered, jumping into the air.

"Heh, no wonder this place is called 'Seabreeze'. Otherwise, it wouldn't be close to the sea," Clemont pointed out.

"Well, that other route near Moki was called 'Lakeside View', yet it had no lakes, only a river," Serena pointed out.

"Maybe they mistook the river for a lake?" Ash offered weakly.

As they looked for a spot for them to take, they took a look around the beach. There were many people scattered around the white sand, either sitting on beach chairs or lying on towels. There were many children playing near the shore, and some grown men and women fishing with rods. There were also some teens with surfboards in the water.

Aside from people, there were also many Pokemon on the beach as well, vastly different from those they had seen in the grasslands or the mountainside. There were some Corsola playing in the shallow water -the way Serena looked at them made Ash remember the time she tried and failed to catch one, and wondered if she'd try again-, while there were some brown and green Pokemon in the sand that neither he nor his friends had seen before.

It had the body of a coconut, with three legs that looked like seaweed on each side of its body, as well as two additional front limbs ended in brown pincers. A long thin neck ended on a tiny head sprouted of the coconut-like body, said head having black eyes on stalks.

" *Cocaran, the Coconut Pokemon. Grass/Ground. When they retract their eyes and legs, they're almost indistinguishable from a coconut. Their shells are very buoyant, so they float in water,* " the Pokedex droned.

"Grass/Ground, huh? Given the way they look, I thought they'd be Water types," Ash said, taking a look at the Coconut Pokemon.

"Hey, maybe we can get coconut milk out of them!" Bonnie pointed out, as he looked at the Coconut Pokemon with renewed interest. Cocaran, however, grew mighty uncomfortable.

"According to this, they don't produce milk," Serena said, checking Cocaran's entry on the Pokedex, much to Bonnie's disappointment. She then raised an eyebrow, and chuckled. "In fact, coconut milk is their favorite meal."

"... so they eat their own?" Bonnie asked, looking a little taken aback.

Cocaran shot Bonnie an incredulous stare, before it decided to leave the scene by burrowing under the sand.

After finding a good spot to place all their things and getting changed into their swimsuits, the group decided to release their Pokemon, so they could enjoy the nice beach day as well.

"Come out, everyone!"

Pokeballs flew into the air, opening up and releasing beams of light that materialized into their Pokemon. Some looked around the unfamiliar place, almost as if trying to locate opponents to beat, while most of them realized that it was a leisure day, so they relaxed and stretched their limbs.

"Cooooo..." they a little moan of pain.

They all noticed that said moan came from Colarva. The poor Bug and Ice-type Pokemon was sprawled on the sand, looking tired and unwell. A dark puddle of what appeared to be sweat began to form on the sand around him.

"Pi?" Pikachu asked.

"Colarva? Are you okay?" Ash asked, a little worried, before he kneeled before his suffering Pokemon.

Clemont placed his hand under his chin, deep in thought, as if trying to remember something. "Didn't the Pokedex say that Colarva live in the snowy peaks of East Tandor?" the inventor asked. "I believe the poor guy must not be used to warm climates."

"Then we need to do something to keep him fresh!" Serena said, as she looked at the other Pokemon. "Do any of you guys know Ice-type moves?"

All Pokemon looked at each other. Some shrugged, others looked a bit crestfallen over not being able to help. Dunsparce looked indifferent.

Bonnie saw a pair of kids walking by, each eating an ice cream. This gave her an idea. "Maybe we could feed Colarva an ice cream?"

"That's a great idea, Bonnie!" Ash said, as he began to look around. "There must be an ice cream stand somewhere... oh, I think that must be it! Come on Colarva!"

Bonnie looked at Ash, then at Serena. Her lips curved into a devious smile.

"Hey Ash, why don't you-"

"Do you mind if I come with you?" Serena asked, interrupting Bonnie. "I feel I could use an ice cream too."

"Oh, sure," Ash happily said, as he picked Colarva up. "Come on buddy! You'll feel better in no time!"

Serena quickly joined Ash, before he shot Bonnie an annoyed look. The young blonde appeared to be a bit taken aback at first, but she smirked, seemingly satisfied with the result of the event.

...

Ash and Serena walked through the hot white sand towards the ice cream stand in the distance, leaving Clemont, Bonnie and all their Pokemon behind.

Serena looked at Ash -and also took the chance to admire his body devoid of most of the clothes he usually wore- who looked back at her, and smiled, before he returned his sight to the ice cream stand. She wasn't planning to accompany Ash, but Bonnie had put her on a bind. Normally, she'd appreciate the younger girl's efforts of pushing them together, but her approach tended to vary wildly from one occasion to another.

Serena would have to sit Bonnie down and explain her the difference between getting herself out of the way -and maybe taking Clemont with her- so Serena could spend some time alone with Ash, and blatantly pushing for the two of them to do something together when there's no need to.

"If Bonnie is going to not-so-subtly suggest Ash to take me with him as to get closer, I might as well do it on my own volition," Serena thought, letting out a sigh, before looking at Ash a second time. *"Oh well, since we're at it, I might as well enjoy the moment."*

"Don't worry buddy, you're going to feel better in no time," Ash gently reassured the Pokemon between his arms.

"Pikapi," Pikachu added, as he patted the overheated Colarva on his shell.

"Um, Ash. Has this happen before with any of your other Ice-type Pokemon?" Serena asked. She did remember that Ash had a couple Ice-types on Oak's ranch. Glalie stood out among them.

"Not really. Though I know it's not unheard of of such thing happening," Ash began. "I'd say Colarva is pretty young, so he still takes warm temperatures badly. And his time under Team Omega's captivity, and then trying to survive on his own on an unfamiliar

environment didn't do him any good. Then again, I'm sure that after some training and a good diet, he won't have this trouble again."

"It's a pity none of our Pokemon know any Ice-type moves. Otherwise, they could have helped keep Colarva cool," Serena pointed out. "Maybe we should try to teach them, in case another situation like this happens?"

"That's a great idea, Serena!" Ash praised her, making the honey blonde smile bashfully. "I think Greninja's arsenal could use an Ice move. And I'm sure Selkid can learn Ice type moves as well. Plus, having her learn an Ice type move could give her a lot more options for performances. Look what Vitor did with his Eletux!"

"True," Serena nodded. "After seeing how the Contests in Tandor are like, I think me and my Pokémon need to be able to create more varied combinations. Sticking solely to the same routine won't get us far here."

"Didn't Pancham learn Thunder Punch not long ago?" Ash asked.

Serena nodded. "He did. But he did on his own rather than because I taught him. Same with Sylveon learning Moonblast. The only Pokemon who hasn't learned anything new is Braixen. Maybe I should work some new moves with her."

"I've been busy training the Pokemon I captured here, though I'm starting to think that I'm neglecting Pikachu and Greninja," Ash pointed out. "Just because they're veterans doesn't mean that I shouldn't give them attention."

"Pi, pika," Pikachu said, shaking his head, as if to reassure Ash that he wasn't neglecting them. Ash gratefully smiled at him.

"Yeah. I've been busy too making sure Selkid and now Minicorn catch up, that I fear I might not giving my other three Pokemon the attention they deserve," Serena said, before letting out a sigh. "Things were easier when I had so few Pokemon."

"Don't worry, you'll get better in time. I mean, it's entirely normal that new Pokemon demand more attention than Pokemon that have been with you for a long time," Ash reassured her. "As long as you don't forget that your older Pokemon still exist, everything is fine."

Serena didn't say anything, but she couldn't picture herself forgetting about Braixen, Pancham and Sylveon just because she caught shiny new Pokemon.

They reached the ice cream stand, and made their orders, one ice cream for each of them. Thankfully, the stand also sold ice cream for Pokemon, served on bowls so it would be easier for those lacking hands to eat. After paying for their ice cream, Ash and Serena sat on a nearby bench, Pikachu wedged between them, and Colarva under the shadow of the bench, protected from the heat of the sun.

"Co?" Colarva grunted as Ash placed the ice cream bowl in front of him. The spiky insect was immediately drawn by the cold the snack was emitting, smelled it, and took a tentative bite. "Co, colarva!" Colarva chirped, as he began to eat the ice cream with more gusto.

"Do you like it?" Ash asked, though he got no verbal response. "Heh, I knew you would like it. Hope it keeps you cooled off while we're here."

"Co, co!" Colarva happily chirped, the cold treat slowly restoring him to full health.

The two of them ate their ice cream in silence. Serena couldn't help but smile upon thinking that, her past self would get all flustered about how a situation like this, she and Ash eating ice cream together, wearing nothing but their swimsuits, with no company other than a couple Pokemon, would make it like a date. Over time, she learned to treasure every intimate moment she spent with Ash, regardless of how romantic they were, and to enjoy them for what they were.

Not that Serena had given up to pursue a romance with Ash. But she knew better than to rush it, or to get pointlessly flustered over it.

...

While Ash and Serena were away to buy ice cream, Clemont just sat on his towel, watching the rest of their Pokemon and Bonnie play or relax. While continue to work on his inventions was tempting, he felt that, just this once, he should relax and do nothing other than enjoy the warmth of the sun and the coolness of the sea breeze.

Then again, it's not that he could work on his machines while keeping an eye on the Pokemon and his little sister, now that Ash and Serena weren't there.

Speaking of which, her little sister was playing with Dedenne, Chespin, Bunnelby, Pancham, Selkid, Minicorn and Birbie on the shore, running around, laughing while they tackled each other into the water or tried to get the others soaked with splashes of water. Some other kids her age were drawn to her, no doubt thank to the large number of Pokemon she was playing with, and began to play with her and the Pokemon. Oh well, it was good for Bonnie to spend some time with kids her age.

The Pokemon that weren't with Bonnie didn't look to be up to much: Greninja was under the shade of a palm tree, sitting cross-legged, meditating. Or maybe dozing off, Clemont couldn't tell. There was a lump of sand Clemont knew was Dunsparce, probably sleeping as well. Braixen was happily basking under the sun. Luxray was lying on the sand, though not sleeping, as his barely blinking eyes were trained upon Bonnie and the other Pokemon, as if to make sure nothing bad happened to them.

And then there was Eevee, the newest member of his team, who was apparently flirting with Sylveon, the latter Pokemon not playing him much attention.

"Half my Pokemon have a crush on Serena's Sylveon," Clemont said, shaking his head a little. He then looked at the area where Bonnie was, and saw Chespin and Pancham trying to push each other into the water. "Heh, let's hope Chespin doesn't see what's Eevee is doing."

Even if Chespin hasn't tried to flirt with Sylveon for some time, Clemont wasn't sure that flame was truly gone, and he didn't want bad blood between his Pokemon.

Through the corner of his eye, Clemont saw that Eevee and Sylveon were heading towards the water - though not the area where Bonnie and the other Pokemon were playing.

Clemont was a little taken aback, given that he wasn't expecting Eevee to succeed like that. Moved by curiosity, he leaned forward, his eyes now fixed on his newest Pokemon.

Once they were near the water, Eevee formed a sphere of darkness in front of his mouth, and fired it into the horizon, the projectile creating small ripples on the water as it sailed into the distance.

"That was a Shadow Ball..." Clemont said, adjusting his glasses.

Then, it came Sylveon's turn. She tried to emulate Eevee, but unlike him, all she did was summon a small sphere of darkness, a little more than a marble, that petered out and dissolved into nothing before it could even sail over the water. Eevee once again repeated the move, and Sylveon tried to emulate it, without much success.

" *So Eevee is trying to woo Sylveon by teaching her a new move...*" Clemont realized, adjusting his glasses. A small smile appeared on his face, before adding out loud: "Well, that's a good tactic."

"Big bro!" Bonnie's voice yelled.

Clemont saw his little sister, still soaked from head to toe, walking towards him. The Pokemon were still on the shore, playing on their

own. The kids she had been playing with were nowhere to be seen, but she didn't look like she had a fight or anything. In fact, she looked pretty excited.

"There's going to be a Magikarp Jump contest right now!" Bonnie happily said, bouncing up and down. "Why don't we go to see it? It sounds like really fun!"

So that's where the other kids went, Clemont deduced. Oh well, it's not like he was against spending time with Bonnie. Especially since, once they reached the Power Plant, he wouldn't have any other chance to do it.

"Sure, why not," Clemont said, as he got on his feet. "Luxray, will you watch over everybody else until I return?"

"Lux!" Luxray agreed, sounding as if Clemont didn't even need to ask him such a thing.

"Good. We'll be back in a while."

After a few minutes walking, Clemont and Bonnie arrived to a spot on the beach where many people were gathering, and he correctly deduced that must be where the contest was taking place. He scanned the crowd, wondering if Ash and Serena were there, but if they were there he didn't see them. Maybe he didn't find a Magikarp Jump contest appealing, and truth be told, Clemont didn't either.

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, the Magikarp High Jump tournament is about to begin!" said the announcer.

And thus, the contest began. People cheered whenever the Magikarp jumped, holding their breath as they leaped into the air, before they stopped and let gravity pull them back down. The crowd cheered wildly whenever a Magikarp jumped especially high, and Clemont found himself rather enraptured by something that sounded so boring on paper.

Eventually, they reached the finals, between a rather muscular man under the name of Kasukarp and his shiny Magikarp, nicknamed Shinegoldie, and a boy Clemont's age named Goh who had short black hair and a fairly androgynous appearance, and his larger than usual Magikarp. According to the announcer, Goh was also from the same region as Ash, funnily enough.

"Ready... get set... jump!" the announcer called.

"Magikarp/Shinegoldie, jump!" Goh and Kasukarp yelled at once.

While Shinegoldie managed to jump a respectable height, Goh's large Magikarp jumped so high, he disappeared into the sky, much to everybody else's utter amazement.

"Whoa, Goh had wiped the floor with Kasukarp!" Bonnie cheered.
"Well done, Goh!"

The public continued to look into the sky, looking for any sign of Goh's Magikarp coming down. But they waited and waited, but the Magikarp didn't come down. People started to mutter. Goh looked visibly worried.

"Uh... since according to the tournament rules, the results are measured after landing..." the announcer began, sounding unsure.
"... that means Kasukarp's Shinigoldie is the winner by default!"

There was a half hearted applause at the announcement.

"Yes!" Kasukarp cheered, seemingly happy with winning through a technicality. "We're still the kings of Magikarp Jump!"

With such a weird and frankly anticlimatic ending to the tournament, the crowd began to disperse. Clemont and Bonnie walked back towards the spot their Pokemon and their things were at, passing through a row of several men who were fishing near the shore.

"Man, what a bummer. The tournament was so great, but then Goh's Magikarp loses because of such a dumb reason," Bonnie whined.

"Nene," Dedenne agreed.

"I'm worried about that Magikarp," Clemont pointed out. "What must have happened for it to not come down?"

"Maybe it jumped so high it flew out of the planet," Bonnie casually said.

"Come on Bonnie, that's ridiculous," Clemont said. "Do you know the amount of energy needed to escape the planet's gravitational pull? For a mere Pokemon to be able to do that... it's scientifically impossible."

"OUCH!" somebody cried in pain.

Clemont and Bonnie's heads quickly turned towards the source of the cry, and they saw it was one of the men fishing by the shore. He had dropped his fishing rod into the water, and was nursing his hand as if something had hurt it. The two siblings quickly went to check on him.

"Are you okay, sir?" Clemont asked the fisherman, before picking up the rod and handing it back to him.

"I think. Thanks," the fisherman said, as he gratefully took the rod back.

"What happened?" Bonnie asked.

"A mostly odd thing... I was fishing, when something bit the bait, and I reeled in... and something zapped me!" the fisherman explained.

"Zapped?" Clemont repeated. "... well, maybe you caught a Pokemon that's both Water and Electric?"

"It must be that damned Elettix again," a second fisherman said.

"Eletux?" Bonnie asked.

"That can't be right," the fisherman said, shaking his head. "Eletux live mostly in lakes and rivers. They've been spotted in the sea a couple times, but those times are extremely rare. Plus-"

BZZZZ!

"OW!" another fisherman yelled, dropping his fishing rod as well and falling to the shallow water on his rear. "What the...? Something shocked me!"

BZZZZ!

"AW!" a third fisherman shouted, unwittingly following the actions of the first and second ones.

The rest of the nearby fishermen, seeing what happened, quickly pulled back their rods and got out of the water.

"Just... what in the name of Leviathao is going on?" another fisherman asked.

"Maybe it's an Eletux after all..." the first fisherman was forced to admit.

"See? I told you! That Eletux has been here bothering us for quite a few days now," the second fisherman said, before looking towards the sea, and scowled. "Good for nothing troublemaker, bothering people who are just minding their own business..."

"But what it's doing here? This is seawater!" another fisherman protested.

"I don't know, but as long as that Eletux is here, we won't be able to fish. I better go somewhere else," another fisherman said, as he walked away. The small group of fishermen followed suit, quickly dispersing, leaving Clemont and Bonnie alone.

"It seems that Eletux is a troublemaker," Bonnie said, crossing her arms and gazing into the water, as if trying to see where he was. "Unlike Vitor's Eletux, which is so nice."

"Well, it's kind of expected. Trained Pokemon tend to be less unruly and hostile to humans than wild Pokemon," Clemont explained.

"We should do something about it. Shocking those fishermen wasn't very nice," Bonnie said.

"If he continues causing trouble, somebody will call the Rangers, and they'll solve this problem as fast as efficiently as possible," Clemont replied.

"The Rangers? Ha!" the second fisherman said. "I already called them a few times, but according to those guys, a mere Eletux bothering people isn't reason enough for them to show up. Heh, as if they had anything better to do..."

"In that case, let us deal with him!" Bonnie offered, before she looked at Clemont. "Besides, Eletux might try to zap people bathing in the water too," Bonnie said, before she looked towards the direction they came from. "Some of our Pokemon are still playing in the water."

Clemont looked in the same direction, and saw said Pokemon blissfully playing in the water, splashing at each other. Remembering how quickly they turned on each other when Minicorn stole their food, the inventor realized that if Eletux chose them as their next targets, another free for all might happen as a result of the Pokemon trying to find the culprit.

"... I think you may have a point," Clemont said, adjusting his glasses. "Let's make sure that Eletux doesn't cause any problem."

"If he doesn't have a trainer, you should catch him yourself," Bonnie suggested. "You didn't catch any new electric Pokemon after Luxray."

Clemont didn't say anything, but he didn't oppose the idea.

...

A few minutes later, after Clemont fetched Luxray and Chespin - leaving Braixen in charge to watch the remaining Pokemon-, Clemont and Bonnie had returned to the area the fishermen were. The plan was to use Luxray's vision to locate Eletux, and Chespin's Vine Whip to catch him and pull him out of the water, while Clemont was on the water, acting as the bait.

"Why I'm the one who has to be on the water?" Clemont protested.

"If not you, who else then? Dedenne?" Bonnie asked, while holding her Pokemon protectively. "Come on! Pretend you're having a great time so that Eletux comes to ruin your day!"

"Okay..." Clemont sighed, as he began to waddle through the water from one side to another.

As Clemont pretended, rather unconvincingly, to be having fun, Luxray watched the water intently while Chespin just stared at both his trainer at the sea with a hesitant expression, not knowing well what was he doing there.

Clemont spend a few minutes waddling through the water and making some small splashes with his hands, but nothing happened. For a few minutes, Bonnie watched his brother's lame attempt at drawing Eletux out. Then, during a brief flash, she saw something moving close to him.

"Clemont, I think it's there!" Bonnie yelled.

"Where-AH!" Clemont yelped, seemingly seeing something swimming close to him underwater. The blond began to panic, but managed to call for action. "Chespin, Vine Whip!"

"Ches!" Chespin replied, firing two vine whips into the water next to his trainer. The whips wrapped around something, and pulled it out of the water...

"Karp!"

... revealing it to be a Magikarp.

Both Bonnie and Clemont sighed, the former in disappointment, the latter in relief, before Chespin, not knowing what to do, opted for returning the clueless fish back to the water.

"I should have realized it wasn't an Eletux. Otherwise Luxray would have seen it, right?" Clemont asked.

"Lux," Luxray, who was lying on the sand on his belly, nodded softly.

"Let's try again," Bonnie said.

And try again they did. Clemont managed to draw quite a few aquatic Pokemon, but none of them was Eletux. It was obvious in hindsight that none of them were Eletux since Luxray didn't warn him of Eletux's presence. However, whenever Bonnie would see something move near Clemont, she would scream, causing Clemont to panic and order Chespin to fire Vine Whip. After several failed attempts, Clemont was ready to throw the towel.

"This isn't working," the inventor said. "We need to think-"

"LUXRAY!" Luxray shouted, as he jumped to his feet, his body tense and ready to battle.

"What, where!?" Clemont panicked, as he looked around him, trying to find a hint of where the mischevous Pokemon might be.

"Tux, tux," a voice cried softly behind him.

Clemont turned around, and indeed, there was an Eletux there. Or better said, the head of an Eletux peeking out of the water, looking at

Clemont with an unreadable expression. Or at least, an expression that didn't make Clemont feel safe around the Water-type Pokemon.

"Hey there," Clemont said, trying to sound friendly.

"Tux?" Eletux asked, titling his head quizzically.

"You're an Eletux aren't you? Well, of course you are, that was a bit dumb of me to say, hehe," Clemont chuckled nervously, as he began to look around. "So... haven't you been causing some problems to those fishermen, weren't you?"

Clemont expected some form of acknowledgement for his question, but all he was met with was silence.

"I'm sure you didn't mean harm and you only wanted to play," Clemont continued. "But you can't-AGH!"

Clemont was interrupted when all of sudden, Eletux fired a Water Gun to his face, making him fall backwards into the water.

"LUX!" Luxray roared, as he jumped into the water, ready to protect his trainer from the rogue Water and Electric type.

"Chespin, pull Clemont back!" Bonnie hastily ordered.

Chespin obeyed, firing two vine whips, this time directed at Clemont, which wrapped under his arms, lifted him out of the water, and gently placed him back on the sand. Meanwhile, Luxray attempted to catch Eletux, but the Hippocampus Pokemon had advantage in the water, and quickly swam away. Letting out a low growl, Luxray swam back to the shore. And shook the water out of his fur.

"Are you okay, Clemont?" Bonnie asked, holding her hands a little worried.

"Y-Yeah, that Water Gun wasn't that powerful," Clemont reassured her, before coughing out some water he had swallowed. "I guess that Eletux does like to cause mischief for fun."

"That Eletux needs somebody to set him straight," Bonnie said, crossing her arms, and looking into the water. "Though, I don't know how are we going to catch him now. If you get into the water, he'll know it's a trap."

"True. Eletux might like to cause problem, but he didn't look stupid," Clemont agreed.

"Fishermen appeared to be his favorite target," Bonnie pointed out. "We could try to fish him with a rod, but then he'll shock us..."

"Wait... that's it! All we need is a rod that Eletux can't use to shock us!" Clemont said, as his eyes gleamed with an excited glint. "And I have such rod! The future is now thanks to science! Clemontic gear on!"

However, nothing happened. It took Clemont a couple seconds to realize that he wasn't carrying his backpack. The inventor's face reddened a little.

"Well, that was embarrassing," he sheepishly chuckled. "Thank goodness no one saw that..."

"I saw it. And Luxray and Chespin saw it too," Bonnie flatly said.

...

A few minutes later, Clemont returned from the spot where he and his friends and sister had left their backpacks. He was carrying a sleek looking fishing rod.

"Behold! A normal fishing rod, but completely automatized! The rod uses professional fishing techniques to calculate casting techniques and depths to fish from, and then, once a Pokemon bites the lure, it automatically reels it in!" Clemont proudly explained. "I call it... the Automatic Fisher and Jumper Fishing Rod!"

"Not getting into how your naming skills still need a lot of improvement... how is that rod going to help us?" Bonnie asked, as she studied the invention with her eyes.

"Didn't you hear me? This rod does everything in place of the fisherman! Now look!" Clemont said, before casting the lure into the water, about five meters away from the shore. Then, he stabbed the lower end of the rod into the sand, deep enough for it to remain firm. "See? We don't have to do anything! The rod will do all the work!"

"Do you think it's a good idea to use an *electronic* rod to catch a Pokemon that likes to *zap* fishermen?" Bonnie asked, crossing her arms.

"I had that in mind, so I designed the rod to be extra resistant to electric attacks," Clemont said. "Now all we need to do is sit and watch."

Clemont and Bonnie sat on the sand, looking at the water in front of them, with Chespin and Luxray sitting besides them. Then, after a couple minutes, Luxray quickly jumped to his feet, growled and glared at the water, and a second after that, something pulled the line, followed by yellow electric sparks traveling alongisde it. However, like Clemont had said, the rod resisted.

"There! We have him now!" Clemont said, as the rod began to reel the line, and Eletux with it.

"ELE!" Eletux cried from the water, as his head was pulled. His body crackled with sparks as he sent more electricity towards the rod, while resisting its pull.

The rod held in place, but a buzzing noise could be heard from one of its components, while a thin plume of smoke appeared from another.

"Oh no! Eletux is overloading the rod!" Clemont said in panic.

"I thought you said you made it electricity-proof!" Bonnie yelled at him.

"I said I made it resistant to electricity, but I wasn't expecting Eletux's electric attacks to be that strong!" Clemont yelled back at her, though unlike Bonnie, his voice reflected worry and fear rather than anger.

"I knew it would end up exploding..." Bonnie deadpanned, as the thin trail of smoke coming from the rod became thicker.

Then, something unexpected happened. Luxray leaped towards the shore, but rather than going after Eletux, he bit down the line, redirecting Eletux's electricity from the rod towards his own body. Luxray flinched when the foreign electricity entered his body, but resisted. Then, with all his might, Luxray tugged the line with as much force as he could, violently pulling Eletux out of the water. The Water and Electric-type soared through the air in an arc above Clemont and Bonnie, the lure dropping from his mouth while mid air, before painfully crashing on the ground, raising a small cloud of sand.

"He did it! Luxray pulled Eletux out of the water!" Bonnie exclaimed, bouncing up and down.

Eletux got back on his feet, shaking his head to get rid of the dizziness of the impact, before dashing towards the water. However, before he could reach the sea, Luxray jumped in front of him, cutting his path.

"Well done Luxray!" Clemont praised his Pokemon, as he ran behind him. "Now that Eletux is out of the water, he'll have to face us head on! Are you ready?"

"Lux!" Luxray nodded, before he glared at Eletux.

The Water and Electric-type returned the glare. It seemed that, despite attacking from the safety of the water, he wasn't adverse to a fight on solid ground. Eletux was the first one to attack, as the bulb

on his longest tail glowed with a yellow light, before firing a thin stream of electricity.

"That's Charge Beam! Luxray, counter it with Swift!" Clemont ordered.

"Lux!" Luxray said, as he swung his tail towards the incoming attack, releasing a flurry of golden stars that flew towards the electric bolt in a straight line. The stars crashed against the incoming electric attack one after the other, bursting into golden sparkle whenever they impacted the Charge Beam, until both attacks cancelled each other.

"Now, Luxray, Thunder Fang!" Clemont ordered.

Luxray charged towards his fellow Electric-type, a torrent of electric sparks pouring from his open mouth. Eletux fired several Water Guns at Luxray, but the Gleam Eyes Pokemon was able to dodge them without slowing down. Once he reached close combat distance, Luxray sunk his electricity-imbued fangs onto Eletux's body.

"RAY!"

"TUUUUUX!" Eletux cried in pain.

"Hold on, Luxray! Don't let him escape you!" Clemont told his Pokemon, and Luxray faithfully obeyed.

Eletux, however, was about to prove to be more resilient than his appearance would suggest. His cheeks puffed up, before releasing a cloud of cold, white smoke into Luxray's face. This caused the Gleam Eyes Pokemon to accidentally drop Eletux, who quickly used the mist as a cover to put some distance between himself and his much stronger opponent.

"That's Mist!" Bonnie said in realization.

"Quickly, Luxray, don't let him escape!" Clemont urged him.

"Luxray," the Electric-type Pokemon calmly said, his eyes glowing, shaking his head.

Clemont understood what he meant. "He... he isn't trying to escape?"

"Lux," Luxray nodded.

"I see," Clemont said, his eyes locked onto the mist. "In that case, Elettix will try to use the fog as a cover to attack. That will be your chance, Luxray! The mist is useless against your eyes!"

"Ray!" Luxray proudly agreed.

It didn't took long for the attack to come. A yellow light shone within the mist, before a ball of electricity shot out of it, aiming for Luxray.

"Electro Ball, huh? Luxray, counter it with Discharge!" Clemont commanded.

Once again, Luxray's body crackled with electricity, before firing multiple yellow lightning bolts at the incoming electric orb. But much to Clemont and Luxray's surprise, the electric orb suddenly transformed into a circular net made of electricity. Most of Luxray's bolts went through the net's openings, before Luxray was trapped by the net.

"Luxray!" Clemont cried.

"Just what was that?" Bonnie asked, sounding outraged. "What kind of attack-"

"Electroweb. An electric attack that can slow down a Pokemon," Clemont said in realization. "Electroweb sometimes looks similar to Electro Ball just after it's been cast. I should have ordered Luxray to dodge instead."

Luxray shook the web off of his body, but his body already felt a little more numb and heavy. That moment, the fog disappeared, revealing

Eletux. The Water and Electric type Pokemon looked at Luxray smugly.

"Luxray, Discharge!" Clemont ordered once again.

For the third time, Luxray's body was charged with electricity, before releasing it in the form of multiple lightning bolts. However, those bolts appeared to move slower than they did before. Eletux began to jump around the sand, skillfully dodging Luxray's attacks, before firing a powerful stream of water at Luxray from his mouth.

"Luxray, dodge!" Clemont called.

Luxray tried to get out of the way of the attack, but thanks to Electroweb's effect, he wasn't fast enough, and the stream of water slammed into his body, sending him crashing backwards.

"Luxray!" Clemont cried. "Luxray, are you okay?"

"Lux..." Luxray wheezed, as he got back to his feet. He was panting, and his body had a few bruises, but he didn't look to hurt.

"That Eletux is craftier than I thought," Clemont said, before looking at Chespin, who had been watching the fight in awe. "Chespin, go and help-"

"LUXRAY!" Luxray roared, causing Clemont to startle. He then glared at Eletux, before growling softly at him.

"Luxray..." Clemont said. He felt the need to call his Pokemon out for acting so prideful, but it was in Luxray's nature. He was a loyal and dutiful Pokemon who saw himself not only as the protector of the rest of Clemont's Pokemon, but their trainer as well. And if Luxray couldn't defeat this Eletux who had dared to attack Clemont, what would that say of him? "Alright, Luxray, I have faith you can do it!"

"Lux!" Luxray said, standing proud on his four legs.

Eletux then began to run and jump around Luxray, raising small trails of sand around him. It seemed that Eletux was aware that he was now the faster of the two, and wanted to exploit that advantage for all what it was worth. He sometimes fired Charge Beams of Water Guns at Luxray, which the Gleam Eyes Pokemon was too slow to dodge.

"That Eletux thinks that he has mobility advantage over Luxray. Does he know Luxray has an attack that can't be dodged?" Clemont wondered. "Luxray, use Swift!"

"Ray!" Luxray cried, swinging his tail at Eletux, releasing yet another flurry of golden stars.

Eletux moved around in an attempt to dodge the attack. But much to the Hippocampus Pokemon's shock, the stars actually homed on him as if they had life of their own. Caught off guard, he was hit by the attack before he could use one of his own to counter it, and was painfully pelted by a shower of energy stars.

"Time to finish this! Luxray, Wild Charge!" Clemont called.

"Luuuuuux... !" Luxray charged as fast as he could towards Eletux, as a thick cloak of yellow electricity engulfed his whole body.

Eletux was still reeling from the damage caused by Swift when he caught a glimpse of what was coming to him, and looked at Luxray like a Deerling caught in the headlights. "El?"

"RAY!"

Luxray slammed into Eletux with as much force as he could muster, and the moment he slammed into his foe, the cloak of electricity exploded into a blast of lightning bolts. The force of the slam and the electric explosion sent Eletux flying backwards, before loudly crashing against the sand.

As this happened, Clemont pulled out an empty pokeball from the pocket of his swimming trunks. "Pokeball, go!"

Clemont tossed the pokeball towards the downed Eletux. The capture device found its mark, opened up, and sucked Eletux inside it, before closing and dropping to the ground. Clemont and Bonnie held their breath as they watched the pokeball wiggling a couple times, before it stopped, and dinged, signaling a successful capture.

"You did it, Clemont! Yay!" Bonnie cheered, as she began to jump up and down.

"Nenene!" Dedenne cheered as well.

"Ches, chespin!" so did Chespin.

Clemont walked towards the now still pokeball, and picked it up.

"Today is a great day for science, I caught an Eletux!" Clemont said, raising Eletux's pokeball.

"... ray," Luxray said, before he collapsed on the sand.

"Luxray!" Clemont said, as he rushed to check his Pokemon. He was pretty tired and bruised, not to mention sweating down a waterfall, given he had to fight under such a heat, but so far, he didn't look too bad. Clemont smiled, as he rubbed Luxray's mane. "You were great, Luxray. An impressive battle."

"Lux..." Luxray weakly said, his mouth curving into something that appeared to be a smile.

"Say, how about a treat for helping me catch a new Pokemon?" Clemont suggested. "Right now, I think all of us could use an ice cream."

Luxray merely nodded.

...

Sometime later, the entire group gathered once again at the spot they had left most of their stuff and their Pokemon. Needless to say,

Bonnie excitedly told Ash and Serena how Clemont and Luxray had fought and caught that rogue Eletux. They also made sure to bring Luxray a big bowl of ice cream, so the Gleam Eyes Pokemon could both fight the heat and recover his strength.

"Man, what a bummer. We split for the day, and we miss Clemont catching a new Pokemon!" Ash whined. Pikachu shook his head patted him on the head.

"So, why don't you show us Eletux, so we can greet him into the group?" Serena suggested.

"Of course," Clemont said, getting out the pokeball of his newest capture. "Come out, Eletux!"

The pokeball opened, releasing the Water and Electric-type starter Pokemon of Tandor. He looked around, and was a little startled to see the sheer amount of humans and Pokemon looking at him.

"Don't be afraid, these people and Pokemon are your new friends," Bonnie happily reassured him. "Say hello to Eletux!"

All the Pokemon did so, some with most enthusiasm than others.

"Co!"

And there was Colarva, who launched himself onto Eletux and gripped him with his little legs in an attempt to hug him. Eletux, accosted by the cold, growled and began to gather electricity in order to get rid of the literal cuddle bug.

"Lux..." Luxray growled, as he pierced Eletux with a disapproving glare.

Eletux gulped, and relented, resigning himself to suffer Colarva's cold loving embrace.

"Excuse me, Colarva, but I'm afraid that you're making Eletux a little uncomfortable, hugging him like that," Clemont politely asked.

"Would you mind giving him some space?"

"Larva!" Colarva happily agreed, as he jumped off of Eletux's body, much to the Hippocampus Pokemon's relief.

"See, Eletux? You don't need to be mean. You can accomplish a lot of things by being nice," Clemont told him.

"Lux," Luxray added, underscoring what Clemont had said.

Eletux looked at Clemont, and then at Luxray, as if judging their words, before he reluctantly nodded, and let the other Pokemon greet him on a more personal basis.

The group spend another hour on the beach. Ash, Serena and Bonnie went to the water to play with some of their Pokemon, while Clemont decided to stay on his towel and rest a bit after the intense battle against Eletux, with Luxray keeping him company. After that, they got dressed back on their usual clothes, and continued their journey towards Burole Town.

...

Goh sat on the sand, crestfallen, looking at the sky, wondering what has been of his Magikarp. Would he be okay? Would he be safe? It was hard to tell. And the thought ate him on the inside.

"Huh?" Goh asked, upon seeing something blinking into the twilight sky. Startled, he quickly jumped to his feet as he saw that a meteor was heading right towards him. A meteor that was very familiar to him.

"KAAAAAARP!"

The meteor slammed into the ground in front of him, opening a large crater in the sand. And inside that crater was no other that Goh's larger than normal Magikarp, flopping as if nothing had happened.

"YOU'RE BACK!" Goh said, as he hugged the giant fish in elation.

Author's Note: And Clemont catches his second Tandorian Pokemon! Yay!

Yeah, we're 12 chapters into the story, so Clemont was due for a focus chapter, given that he didn't get enough focus during the Eevee capture episode since that was a collective capture. And as you can imagine, Eletux was a very deliberate choice on my part, since I feel Clemont needed at least another Electric-type beyond Luxray.

Speaking of Luxray, I took this chapter as an opportunity to flesh him out a little more. In the anime he's just Clemont's strongest Pokemon, but he only uses Luxray for tough battles or whenever they need to look for something, and almost never explore his personality after evolving, so I hope I give him some justice here by emphasizing his role as the "alpha" or "big brother" of Clemont's team, and all what it entails.

I felt like including Goh's cameo here after watching that two-shorts episode of JN, which was the only JN episode I had watched while writing this chapter (since then, I also watched Iris and Serena's respective return episodes). I originally watched it for the Slowpoke/Slowking shenenigans, but not only did I find that part rather meh, but I ended up liking the Magikark Jump contest a lot. And given that this chapter took place in a beach, I felt like including that contest as a nod to that episode.

Next chapter, our heroes arrive at Burole Town, where Ash will fight for his second badge and Serena for her second ribbon. In the meantime, don't forget to leave a review! Seeing your reviews really makes my day and encourages me to keep writing.

Blade vs Drill: The Battle Underground

Chapter 13:

Blade versus Drill: The Battle Underground

Burole Town

After another day of traveling through Seabreeze Way, the group had finally arrived at Burole Town, which once again welcomed them with a sign.

Welcome to Burole Town

City of Caves. Take our word, don't travel west.

Checking information on her tablet, Serena explained that the "City of Caves" moniker came from the fact that Burole Town started out as a mining town that dug out iron and copper. Eventually, the mines ran out of ore, but the town remained.

They took a good look at the town as they set a foot on it, they could see that Burole Town could be described as a happy medium between Moki Town and Nowtoch City. It was closer to Moki Town in both extension and size of the buildings, but unlike the rural Moki and its rustic wooden houses, Burole had a more urban feel to its design, with more buildings made of metal and concrete.. And unlike Nowtoch, which was surrounded by rocky terrain and had a few trees here and there, Burole was sandwiched by a small mountain range to the north, and dense greenery to the south, east and west.

"Why don't they want us to travel west?" Bonnie had asked.

"Yeah. We come from the west, right?" Ash asked.

"Why, you ask?" a new voice said. The group turned to the direction of the voice, and saw a bunch of teeneage girls a couple years older

than them sitting on a bench. "Why, because the towns to the west are a bunch of backwards places full of dumb hillbillies."

"That's a very awful thing to say," Serena replied, eyeing the teenage girls disapprovingly.

"You're not from here, are you?" another teenage girl asked, though it sounded more like a statement. "Well, if you only saw Moki and Kevlar, you probably think that Tandor must be quite the awful place. But don't worry, now that you're here, you can enjoy what a REAL Tandorian town has to offer!"

"Yeah, let's hope you have a fun time here!" a third teen girl said. "I know this is not exactly Bealbeach City, but compared to Moki and Kevlar, it may be!"

The rest of the teenage girls laughed as Ash and his friends continued their journey into the former mining town.

"Boy, I hope that not all people from this place are so arrogant," Ash sneered. "Or else our stay here is not going to be very pleasant."

"I think it's best if we forget about them," Serena advised, as she continued to check her tablet. "So, we're quite ahead of schedule. Contest-wise, I mean. There are still four days until the contest held in this town."

"Should we go to the Gym then?" Clemont suggested, looking at Ash.

"Eh, there's no hurry," Ash said, shaking his head. When he saw the other three raising their eyebrows in surprise, Ash decided to elaborate. "I think I could use a day or two to give my Pokemon a bit more training. You already saw Maria in action, so I'm sure whoever is the Leader here will be just as tough."

Serena nodded in approval, happy that Ash didn't let the excitement to fight a new Gym Leader get the best of him and go ill prepared.

"In that case, let's go to the Pokemon Center First."

...

The group arrived at the Pokemon Center, and booked two rooms, one for the boys and another for the girls, for four days. Then, after having a nice lunch, they headed to the battleground next to the Center in order to train, which, thankfully, wasn't being used at the time. Or better said, Ash, Clemont and Bonnie went there; Serena claimed she had a new idea for a performance involving Pancham and Minicorn, but she needed more space than half a battleground.

So now, it was just Ash training his Pokemon, with Clemont and Bonnie watching and trying to help their friend with whatever they could. Right now, Colarva was sparring with Birbie, and Dunsparce was sparring with Greninja, much to the latter's chagrin, while Pikachu oversaw both sparring sessions, though he was more focused on Colarva and Birbie.

"Okay Colarva, show me what you can do!" Ash told the Snow Mite Pokemon.

"Co!" Colarva happily said, before he turned towards Birbie and prepared to attack. From his tiny mouth, Colarva fired a sticky string towards Birbie, which the Eden Bird Pokemon skillfully dodged.

"So, you know String Shot? That can be useful," Ash said. "What else?"

"Co, co!" eager to prove himself, Colarva used another move, and blew a chilly gust of powdery snow at Birbie. This time, Birbie was unable to dodge the move, and the blue bird was covered in frost and shivering on the spot.

"And that's Powder Snow!" Clemont pointed out.

"What else can you do, Colarva?" Bonnie asked, eager to see what the little bug could do.

"Co...?" Colarva asked, looking between confused and uncomfortable.

"Don't you know more attacks besides those two, Colarva?" Ash asked, sounding a little underwhelmed.

Sensing his trainer's disappointment, Colarva slumped a little. "Larva..."

Pikachu and Birbie -the latter still covered in snow- quickly went to comfort the newest member of Ash's team, with Ash himself joining them as well.

"Hey, don't worry, pal. If you don't know that many attacks, that's okay! There will be time to learn more," Ash said, gently patting Colarva's spiky shell. "Say, for the time being, how about you focus on getting a little stronger? Birbie, help Colarva spar. Be gentle with him, okay?"

"Bir, birbie!" Birbie enthusiastically nodded, letting Ash know he could be trusted with Colarva.

"Ash, you weren't planning to use Colarva against the Gym Leader, right?" Clemont asked.

"Of course not. Colarva still needs more training before he can get good enough to match the Pokemon of a Gym Leader," Ash said, looking at Colarva confidently. "And I know he will get there, sooner or later."

"What's wrong with Ash using Colarva?" Bonnie asked. "Ash used Dunsparce against Maria shortly after catching him."

"I *did* train Dunsparce before fighting Maria," Ash reminded the younger girl. "Though, it's not the same situation. Dunsparce is cut from a different cloth. Dunsparce was a Pokemon that knew how to battle well and was hardened by the place he lived in. Colarva was

forcefully taken away from his home and was kept in awful conditions by those traffickers."

Ash then looked where the aforementioned Dunsparce was sparring against Greninja. Or better said, it was Dunsparce attacking and Greninja defending, since Ash doubted Dunsparce would be able to take more than a couple blows from the Ninja Pokemon without fainting, not with his current strength.

"Duuuuuun..." Dunsparce began, as he summoned a ring of golden marble-sized orbs above him. The orbs then began to increase in size, turning into glowing golden chunks of rock, before hurling all of them at Greninja. "PARCE!"

"Gre!" Forming a blade of pure darkness between his webbed hands, Greninja parried the attack with several strikes of Night Slash, destroying the golden rocks, which shattered into hundreds of tiny pebbles that in turn disappeared into tiny sparkles.

"Well done, Dunsparce! You're getting the hang of Ancient Power!" Ash praised.

"Parce," Dunsparce dismissively replied, as if Ash had underestimated him.

Seeing Richard's Dunsparce in action has shown Ash the sheer range of attacks the Land Snake Pokemon could learn. And given that all of Dunsparce's attacks were contact moves, Ash thought Dunsparce could learn one or two ranged attacks. Dunsparce appeared to have some affinity for Ancient Power, and for the past few days, he had been trying as best as he could to master it.

Right then the back door from the Pokemon Center opened, and Serena walked into the battleground.

"Hey guys!" Serena happily greeted them. "Still training hard?"

"You know it!" Ash excitedly said. "How about you? Are you done with that new performance?"

"Not yet, but we're on the right track. Just one or two more days of training," Serena said, as she glanced at Ash's Pokemon. "I decided that Pancham and Minicorn already trained enough, so I wanted to train my other Pokemon for the contest battle. Ash, are you up for a sparring double battle?"

"You don't need to ask!" Ash quickly promised. "Birbie, Colarva! Are you up for a tag team battle?"

"Birb!"

"Co!"

"Awesome! Let's go then!"

And thus Ash helped Serena train for her upcoming contest. They kept training until the sun began to set in the horizon.

...

After two days of training at the Burole Pokemon Center, Ash decided his Pokemon were ready, so he and his friends were heading towards the Burole Town Gym. According to the town map, it was in the northernmost part of the town. However, they began to doubt if the map's accuracy when they realized they were heading into the mountains and out of the town.

"Are you sure this is the right direction?" asked Bonnie, as she looked at the last bunch of houses the group left behind. "We're leaving the town."

"Yeah... normally, most Pokemon Gyms tend to be in the middle of their city or town, so people can find them easily," Ash said, as he scratched his temple. "Maybe we took a wrong turn somewhere?"

"Actually, we're on the right track," Serena said. "Look."

Serena was pointing to a nearby sign. Despite the distance, the big, bold letters on the sign made it easy to read.

No, you didn't take a wrong turn. Burole Town Gym straight ahead.

"Wow, that sign guessed our thoughts. Do you think the Gym Leader is a psychic?" Bonnie asked.

Her question was left unanswered. Trusting the sign, the group continued walking forward, until they found something: the entrance to what appeared to be a mine, blocked by a sturdy-looking steel gate. Above said entrance was the logo of the Pokemon League, which identified the place as an official gym. Ash walked towards the door, and seeing a button next to it, he pressed it down. For a few seconds nothing happened, but after that, the gates began to move aside, making a low pitched screech.

"This has to be weirdest gym I've ever seen," Clemont said, as he inspected the entrance.

They entered the gym, and as expected, it was a pure rock tunnel, albeit with many lamps hanging from each walls in order to keep it well-lit. There were rail tracks on the ground. They tentatively followed the tunnel, which eventually led to a large, well-lit chamber. Said chamber had four other exits, as well as many other railtracks that went in and out of them. And just as they arrived, a man entered the place from another of the entrances.

"Oh, hey there!" the man said. "Welcome to the Burole Town Gym!"

The man in question was somebody in his late thirties. He had fair skin, black hair, and a thin moustache under his nose. He was wearing a black long sleeved shirt and long pants of the same color. Over the shirt, he was wearing a green sleeveless jacket with many pockets. On his head there was a helmet of the same color with a lantern on it. He was also wearing an utility belt with many tools attached to it, such as a small shovel, a pick, a flashlight, and many more.

"Uh... are you the Gym Leader?" Ash hesitantly asked.

"The one and only! Name's Davern, by the way," Davern introduced himself, before chuckling. "I know what you're thinking: I don't look much like a Gym Leader, do I? But as the old saying goes, looks can be deceiving."

"Oh, I see," Ash said, his disposition lightning up, seemingly trusting this man. "Well, my name is--"

"Ash Ketchum. And you're here to challenge me for my badge, don't you?" Davern interrupted, much to Ash and his friends' surprise. The Gym Leader smiled and rolled back his sleeve to show a Pokegear. "Maria told the rest of us about your victory over her, as well as the fact that you'll challenge my gym next."

"Heh, it seems you're starting to make a name for yourself in the region, Ash," Serena giggled, making Ash blush a little.

"No kidding! I mean, Maria sounded so excited after your fight... and boy, if you can get Maria like that, that means you're somebody worth taking seriously. Anyway, we can talk more while we head towards our battleground. Everybody, follow me!"

Davern then walked towards another of the chamber's exits, and the group of teens followed him.

"Don't take offense, Mr. Davern, but this is quite the... odd place to put a Pokemon Gym," Clemont observed.

"None taken, kid. And yes, I know most people may think like that. I mean, a Gym inside a cave? What kind of idiot does that?" Davern asked.

"Well, at least you didn't build your gym inside an active volcano," Ash pointed out.

Bonnie gasped. "You fought a Gym Battle inside a volcano!?" she asked, sounding as if that was the most awesome thing ever.

"Oh, you're talking about Blaine, aren't you? Of course you know him, you're both from Kanto," Davern said with a good natured chuckle. "I don't know how the Pokemon League let him do that. That Gym is a tragedy waiting to happen."

"Well, the Gym's battlefield was destroyed when the volcano almost erupted," Ash explained. "Thankfully there were no victims."

"Tsk, tsk, that Blaine..." Davern said, as he led the group towards a spacious shaft elevator.

When all of them got inside, Davern closed the doors manually, pulled a lever, and the elevator began its slow descent.

"You see, since I was a kid, there's nothing I loved more than caves. They were so spooky and mysterious, and I wanted to explore all of them. And of course, to study and befriend the Pokemon that lived there," Davern began to explain. "When I became the new Gym Leader, the old Gym that inherited from my predecessor was in shambles, so I had it demolished. But I didn't like the idea of being all day cooped between bricks and mortar. So instead of rebuilding it, I decided to use one of the empty mines as the place for the new Gym. Much cozier and welcoming for both me and my cave-dwelling Pokemon, don't you think?"

"Wow. This guy's such a caveman," Bonnie deadpanned.

"Bonnie!" Clemont chastised her.

Davern, however, didn't seem to pay her any mind. "Tandor has a lot of wonderful caves. Did you have the privilege of seeing at least one?" Davern asked.

"Well... we've been in Passage Cave," Serena pointed out, shivering a little when she remembered the violently territorial group of

Pokemon that inhabited that place.

"Oh," Davern said, his enthusiasm seemingly decreasing. "As far as caves go, Passage Cave is kind of meh, so I don't blame you if you didn't enjoy it much. Don't let that experience color your opinion on Tandor's wonderful caves."

That moment, the elevator shaft reached the bottom, and Davern opened the doors, letting them out. They were now inside an extremely large underground cavern. Like the rest of the mine/gym, it was illuminated by many lamps hanging from the walls and the ceilings. There was a battleground with many rocks scattered around it. On one side, there were some seats for the spectators to take.

"Don't worry about possible cave-ins. This place has been reinforced to ensure maximum stability, and has the seal of approval of the Pokemon League," Davern explained. "No natural disasters to be afraid of either."

There was also another man dressed like Davern, holding a small flag on each hand. They guessed he was the judge.

"Good luck, Ash," Serena said, as she Bonnie and Clemont headed towards the seats, while Ash took his place on one of the sides of the battlefield and Davern took the opposite side.

...

Serena, Clemont and Bonnie sat on the empty bleachers, Serena on one side, Clemont on another, and Bonnie on the middle. Looking at Ash, Serena could see that her friend has been itching for a good Gym Battle. It's been quite some time since they left Nowtoch City. She hoped Ash could channel all that pent-up energy to victory.

"Are you ready, Ash?" Davern asked.

Ash smirked confidently. "Do you really need to ask?"

Davern nodded at the referee, who nodded back, and raised both flags. "This is an official Gym Battle between the Gym Leader Davern, and Ash Ketchum. The battle will be single format with no time limit, and each trainer will use up to three Pokemon. The battle will be over when one side has no more Pokemon remaining. Only the challenger may make substitutions. Trainers, select your first Pokemon."

"Alright, time to shine Dearewl!" Davern said, sending his first Pokemon.

From the pokeball emerged a four-legged, equine-looking Pokemon with metallic-like brown skin, a helmet-like piece of metal over its head with a string of curly metal wire coming out of its top, another that looked like a saddle over its back, and a round, light gray metallic plate on each on its thighs.

"Dearewl, huh? It looks similar to..." Ash began, as he pulled out his Pokedex.

"Dearewl, the Iron Horn Pokemon, and Barewl's evolved form. Rock/Steel. It is a stubborn Pokémon that will always stand its ground, even against a much larger opponent. It uses its horn to dig for metal ore." The Pokedex droned.

"Barewl's evolved form, huh? No wonder it looked familiar," Ash said, as he unclipped a pokeball from his belt. "Well, in that case, I shall beat your cave Pokemon with one of my own! Dunsparce, I choose you!"

Ash tossed the pokeball forward, releasing the most obnoxious member of his team. Everybody hoped he wouldn't try to pull the same stunts he was so used to do.

"Oh, you have a cave Pokemon too! Oh boy, Maria was right! This match is going to be incredible!" Davern exclaimed.

The referee lowered both flags in a chopping motion. "Begin!"

~Challenger Ash (Dunsparce, ?, ?) VS Gym Leader Davern (Dearewl, ?, ?)~

"Dunsparce, start with Rollout!" Ash commanded.

"Dearewl counter it with Headbutt!" Davern called.

Dunsparce quickly curled into a ball, and spun towards Dearewl, leaving a trail of dust behind. Dearewl, meanwhile, charged towards the incoming Dunsparce, lowering its head. The two Pokemon clashed, and Dearewl managed to stop Dunsparce's momentum and send him backwards, cancelling the Rollout. Though, by the way Dearewl shook its head, it was obvious it didn't get out of the clash unharmed.

"Rock Slide!" Davern called.

"Avoid it with Dig!" Ah replied.

Dearewl conjured multiple large rocks above Dunsparce, which quickly fell down once gravity took a hold of them. As this happened, Dunsparce leaped into the ground while spinning his body, turning himself into a living drill, burrowing underground just as the rocks buried the spot he was on a moment before.

"Dearewl, quick, get on top of one of the rocks!" Davern said.

"De!" Dearewl agreed, and quickly climbed on top of a nearby boulder.

Ash gritted his teeth as he saw how Dearewl avoided a sure hit. There was no way Dunsparce would be able to pierce that much rock.

And indeed, Dunsparce emerged from underground on a spot next to the rock, while launching himself towards Dearewl. But thanks to the high ground, the Iron Horn Pokemon had a safe way to easily avoid and counter the attack.

"Now, use Headbutt!" Davern ordered.

Dearewl's iron-hard head smashed against the incoming Land Snake Pokemon, neutralizing his attack and sending him crashing against the ground.

"A really smart way to avoid an attack," Clemont commented.
"Davern really knows how to use the irregular terrain of his Gym's battleground to his advantage."

Serena grabbed her blue ribbon. "That's just a setback for Ash. He has already fought on weird battlegrounds before," she said, her eyes fixed on the battle. "Ash also knows how to take advantage of the terrain."

"Now, Dearewl, use Metal Whip!" Davern commanded.

"Metal Whip?" Ash repeated, part confused and part tense. That was an attack Serena had never heard before, and judging by Ash's reaction, neither had he.

The wire sticking out of Dearewl's organic helmet began to glow with a silvery sheen as it quickly enlogated into a proper whip, which was wrapped around Dunsparce's body, immobilizing the Land Snake Pokemon.

"Oh no!" Ash cried. "Dunsparce, try to break free!"

"Parce, dunsparce!" Dunsparce cried, as he tried to futilely resist against the constricting force of the Metal Whip.

"Your Dunsparce can fight back all he wants, but he won't break free of Metal Whip," Davern stated. "Come on Dearewl, apply more pressure!"

Dunsparce cried even louder as the metallic wire squeezed him even tighter. As Ash debated what to do, he realized Dunsparce now had one more weapon to his arsenal, which might help him now.

"Dunsparce, use Ancient Power!" Ash called.

Fighting off the pain, Dunsparce concentrated, and summoned a circle of golden orbs that spun around his body. The orbs grew in size, taking the forms of large golden boulders, before said boulders shot towards Dearewl, smashing against its face repeatedly. Dearewl flinched each time a rock smashed into its face, and even if it didn't release Dunsparce, the Metal Whip loosened.

"Hang on, Dearewl!" Davern encouraged his Pokemon.

"Great job, Dunsparce! Ancient Power again!" Ash called.

Dunsparce summoned another ring of golden rocks, and threw them at Dearewl. This time, the Iron Horn Pokemon couldn't take it anymore, and released Dunsparce from the Metal Whip. The Land Snake Pokemon then glowed with a golden aura for a couple seconds.

"Huh? What was that?" Bonnie asked.

"I think that was the additional effect of Ancient Power," Clemont explained. "It has a chance to increase all the capabilities of the Pokemon that uses it."

"Well, Ash got lucky if the effect was triggered after just two times," Serena noted, before she remembered something that happened during the second battle against Maria. "Wait, didn't you say that Dunsparce has an ability to increase the chances of such effects triggering, right?"

"Exactly, Serene Grace," Clemont confirmed. "Ash was indeed very smart for teaching Dunsparce such a move. Its additional effect will be a great boon."

Serena looked at Dunsparce, who didn't look any stronger than he normally used to. Then again, she knew very well that appearances could be deceiving.

"Dunsparce, Rollout!" Ash ordered.

"Stop it with Rock Slide!" Davern replied.

Once again, Dunsparce curled into a ball and rolled towards Dearewl, leaving an even bigger trail of dust behind, while the Rock and Steel-type Pokemon summoned more boulders to drop on top of Dunsparce. The Land Snake Pokemon, however, was able to roll past the falling rocks before they could hit him thanks to his increased speed, and slammed against Dearewl with greater force than he did before, sending it hurling backwards against one of the battleground's boulders.

"Yes! Direct hit!" Bonnie cheered.

"Let's do it again, Dunsparce!" Ash shouted, looking how Dearewl got back to its feet, or better said, hooves. "Rollout before it has time to recover!"

Dunsparce rolled towards Dearewl once again, who looked at the incoming sphere of destruction not knowing what to do.

"Dearewl, jump!" Davern commanded.

The Iron Horn Pokemon did as it was told, and leaped over Dunsparce, who smashed himself against the same boulder Dearewl was slammed against. Dunsparce unfurled his body, and shook his head to get rid of the dizziness from the hit.

"Now, Rock Slide!" Davern called.

"Avoid it with Dig!" Ash replied.

Once again, Dearewl tried to bury Dunsparce under a rain of boulders that the Land Snake Pokemon averted by drilling underground.

"Dearewl, get on top of that boulder!"

And once again, Dearewl climbed a place from which Dunsparce wouldn't be able to land a clear hit. However, Ash had something planned already.

"Dunsparce, keep digging tunnels under that boulder!" he ordered, much to everybody else's confusion.

Everybody could hear Dunsparce as he dug under the boulder Dearewl was perched on. Then, the ground started to shake, and much to the onlookers' surprise, the boulder began to sink into the battleground. Dearewl looked around, confused, before jumping out of the sinking boulder.

"Wait, no-"

"Now, Dunsparce!" Ash called.

Dunsparce burst from underground right beneath Dearewl, smashing his head under the Iron Horn Pokemon's underside, sending it flying into the air, before it fell down on the ground with a loud thud. Dearewl didn't even make an attempt to get back on its feet.

The referee raised a flag in Ash's direction. "Dearewl can't fight anymore! The winner is Dunsparce!"

Ash and his friends cheered for his victory, as Davern recalled his Pokemon, and thanked it for its efforts before putting it away.

"Nice trick there, turning the battleground against me." Davern praised Ash, as he unclipped another pokeball from his utility belt. "You might have an early lead, but this battle is far from over. Tofurang, time to shine!"

Davern tossed his second pokeball, releasing a large, purple colored, four legged Pokemon Ash had never seen before.

"Rang!" Tofurang cried.

"Tofurang, Tofurang... oh, I remember! Clemont said he had to fight against one on passage cave," Ash said, as he pulled out his Pokedex to scan it. "Evolution of Tonemy? Huh, I wouldn't have guessed it, with how different they look. Dunsparce, can you continue fighting?"

"Parce!" Dunsparce cried energetically.

"Very well then," Ash said.

"Dunsparce versus Tofurang, begin!" the referee shouted.

"Dunsparce, Rollout!"

"Dun!" Dunsparce said, before turning once again into a ball and rolled towards the purple-skinned behemoth.

Davern merely smirked. "Tofurang, Toxic Spikes!"

Tofurang opened its jaws, forming a dark purple energy orb between them. It then launched the orb into the air, which exploded into smaller, spike-shaped purple energy darts that sunk across the entire battlefield. Once the move was done, Dunsparce slammed into Tofurang.

Ash clenched his fists and gritted his teeth as memories of his battle against Paul during the Sinnoh League returned to mind. This time, Ash didn't have a Pokemon with the right skills to clear the spikes out of the field. Despite landing a good hit, Davern had made the rest of the battle significantly harder.

"Rollout again!" Ash commanded.

Dunsparce rolled towards Tofurang again, leaving an even bigger trail of dust behind as his rolling speed increased. But Davern was prepared.

"Tofurang, use Payback!" Davern said.

Tofurang's body started to glow with a red blood aura. The moment Dunsparce slammed into it, said aura glowed even brighter.

"RANG!" Tofurang roared, as it slammed into Dunsparce, sending the hapless Land Snake Pokemon crashing backwards.

"Dunsparce!" Ash cried.

"Sludge Bomb!" Davern added.

Tofurang opened its jaws, and released a barrage of purple sludge globs towards Dunsparce, all of them finding their mark, making Dunsparce cry in pain with each hit. When the attack was over, Dunsparce was lying on his back on a puddle of purple sludge, completely immobile his mouth agape.

The referee raised a flag in Davern's direction. "Dunsparce can't fight any longer! The winner is Tofurang!"

Ash sighed in defeat, as he recalled Dunsparce and thanked him for doing his best.

"Clemont," Bonnie asked. "What's that move Tofurang used at the beginning? It didn't do anything to Dunsparce, but given the way Ash reacted..."

"Toxic Spikes isn't a move to defeat your current opponent, but to cripple the opponents to come," Clemont began to explain. "Right now, any Pokemon Ash sends to battle will take damage and will be poisoned."

"But... that's super unfair for Ash! Now all of his Pokemon are going to end up worse before they can do anything!" Bonnie protested.

"I know, but that's how things are. Ash will have to find a way to fight around the Toxic Spikes... or fight and hope that he can win the battle before the poison whittles down his Pokemon's vitality,"

Clemont said, looking intently at Ash, as if trying to guess what Pokemon would he use next.

Ash didn't take long to answer. "Birbie, I choose you!"

The pokeball opened the moment it touched the ground, releasing Ash's first Tondorian Pokemon, already flapping his wings to keep himself mid-air.

"Birbie, try to stay airborne as much as possible! If you touch the ground, you'll be poisoned!" Ash warned the bird.

"Bir, birbie!" Birbie acknowledged.

"Of course! Toxic Spikes are useless if the Pokemon never touches the ground!" Serena beamed, feeling her hope for Ash returning. "That was such a smart choice!"

"Perhaps, but not the most ideal choice," Clemont countered. Upon seeing Serena's questioning look, he elaborated: "I can tell from experience that Tofurang is a very bulky Pokemon that can take a lot of punishment before going down. And Birbie... well, he's fast and swift, but a small Pokemon like that lacks the power needed to take down Tofurang."

"Ash isn't somebody who takes down opponents through sheer brute force, so Birbie's still a choice that suits him," Serena replied.

"True. Ash probably wants to use Birbie's superior speed to run circles around Tofurang and tire it out, but..."

"But?"

"Well... I think that's something Davern already took into account. Payback is a move that becomes twice as powerful if the user has been hit before," Clemont explained. "And Birbie isn't the kind of Pokemon who can endure powerful hits without going down."

"This isn't the first time Ash had to face a challenging situation. He will find a way," Serena told Clemont, her hope in Ash unshaken.
"Come on, Ash and Birbie! I know you can do it!"

"Bir!" Birbie happily chirped, grateful for the encouragement.

"Yeah, we can't let them down, can we?" Ash asked, as he smiled confidently.

"Birbie versus Tofurang, begin!" the referee said.

"Birbie, let's begin with Air Cutter!"

"Birbie!" Birbie chirped, as he took some altitude, and began flapping his wings, releasing crescents of compressed air towards Tofurang.

"Tofurang, counter that with Sludge Bomb!" Davern called.

The Cave Beast Pokemon opened its jaws wide, releasing a stream of purple colored globs. Both attacks clashed, resulting in an explosion of sludge that splattered the battleground in grime. However, Tofurang's attack packed much more power than Birbie's, and was able to push through the Flying-type move.

"Birbe, get out of the way!" Ash called.

Birbie didn't need to be told, and making use of his superior speed, he was able to avoid all the projectiles by increasing the altitude of his flight.

"You won't be able to avoid the next move, Ash," Davern confidently said. "Tofurang, use Smog! Cover the entire battleground!"

"Rang!" Tofurang cried, and took a deep breath, its body puffing up almost like a balloon, before exhaling from its mouth a torrent of purple, poisonous gas towards Birbie. The gas traveled in a wide cone, making dodging much harder.

Fortunately for Ash, he already had enough experience with that kind of attacks to know that there were alternatives.

"Birbie, push it back with Gust!" Ash commanded.

"Bir-bir-bir-bir... !" Birbie chirped frantically as he flapped his little wings as fast as he could, creating a powerful gust of wind that appeared to push the toxic miasma back.

"Push back, Tofurang! Don't let that bird get the best of you!" Davern encouraged his Pokemon.

The poisonous gas started to come out of the Cave Beast Pokemon's mouth with greater pressure, as Tofurang tried to overpower Birbie's Gust. Birbie, meanwhile started to flap his wings with even more energy, creating more powerful winds. In the end, it would be a battle of endurance decided by what would give in first: Birbie's wings or Tofurang's lungs.

"Tofu-ACK! COF! COF!" Tofurang began to cough, interrupting the stream of smog, which allowed Birbie to push it back.

"Well done Birbie!" Ash praised the little bird. However, his joy lasted little, as he saw how winded the Eden Bird Pokemon was from holding up a Gust for so long against a such a persistent attack from a purely stronger Pokemon. Birbie looked exhausted, and beads of sweat ran down his round body. His wing flaps were slower and slower, and it was obvious he wanted to touch the ground in order to rest for a bit.

Davern's knowing smirk made Ash realize that that wasn't a coincidence. Though the man thought he could play Ash like that, he had another thing coming.

"Birbie, if you need to rest, alight on one of the larger rocks!" Ash told him.

Birbie flew towards the nearest rock in the opposite direction from his foe, and perched on it, thankful that his body could get a reprieve, small as it was, from having to be airborne all the time. Both Birbie and Ash knew that the reprieve would last as long as Tofurang took to catch his breath.

"Tofurang, you okay?" Davern asked.

Tofurang coughed a couple times, releasing some puffs of purple smoke that quickly vanished in the air, before loudly clearing his throat. He was okay now.

"With how much you tired that Birbie, he won't be able to fly so fast right now," Davern concluded. "Tofurang, use Poison Fang!"

"Tofurang!" the Cave Beast Pokemon roared, as it charged towards Birbie with a deceptively fast speed, its jaw opened, showing rows of sharp teeth that glowed with a sickly purple aura.

"Get out of there, now!" Ash called.

Birbie managed to take off before Tofurang could crush the Eden Bird Pokemon between its jaws, biting solid rock instead. However, everybody couldn't help but notice that Birbie's speed was much lower than it had been beginning of the fight.

"That was quite smart on Davern's part," Clemont spoke all of sudden. "The wings are the most important part of any Flying-type Pokemon, especially birds like Birbie. This fight has become much harder for Ash."

"Come on Birbie, you can do it!" Bonnie cheered, as if trying to offset what Clemont had said.

Serena gripped her blue ribbon harder, remembering Clemont's earlier words about Tofurang's superior bulk and offensive power being a bit too much for Birbie to overcome with skill and speed. Still,

Serena wasn't going to give up on her faith that Ash could overcome any odd that was thrown in his way.

"You can do it Birbie!" Serena joined Bonnie in her cheers. "Never give up until it's over!"

Still, those cheers did little to reassure Birbie. Tofurang continued its relentless chase on him, the poor Eden Bird Pokemon being unable to do anything but to run away from the much larger Poison-type, whose pursuit, while not very fast, didn't slow down, and was gradually closing the distance between the two of them.

"Keep going, Tofurang! He's almost yours!" Davern encouraged his Pokemon.

And indeed, Tofurang almost appeared to catch Birbie. It opened its jaws menacingly, ready to sink its poison-coated fangs onto the tender flesh of the Eden Bird Pokemon...

"Birbie, Turn around and use Flash!" Ash quickly shouted.

Birbie did as he was told, and fighting the dread induced by the horrid visage that was Tofurang with its jaws wide open, Birbie's chest crest began to glow with a faint blue light, before it exploded into a flood of white searing light.

"RAAAAAAAAAANG!" Tofurang cried in pain as it was blinded by the sudden burst of light, interrupting its attack. It closed its eyes shut, a few tears of pain trickling through the closed lids, and took a couple step backwards, while it whined for its lost eyesight.

"Tofurang!" Davern shouted, caught just as off-guard as his Pokemon by the attack.

"Now's our chance, Birbie! Fly around and use Air Cutter!" Ash commanded.

His resolve and energies renewed by this unexpected second wind, Birbie nodded and once again took into the air, and flapping his wings as fast as he could, he began to pelt Tofurang with multiple Air Cutters launched from different directions, in order to stop the Cave Beast Pokemon from telling where Birbie was.

"Yes! Such a great counter from Ash!" Clemont beamed, no longer carrying the same cautious pessimism from before. "Cave Pokemon are naturally used to the dark, so their eyes can't stand bright lights!"

"I knew that Ash could do it!" Serena cheered, her faith in him validated.

"Now let's hope Birbie can cause enough harm to Tofurang before the latter recovers," Clemont added, as his eyes focused on the Cave Beast Pokemon.

"Continue the assault, Birbie! You almost have it!" Ash shouted.

"You don't need your eyes to fight, Tofurang! Rely on your hearing!" Davern said.

Tofurang tried to calm down and ignore the pain of the constant barrage of the blades of compressed air. His wing-like ears twitched as it tried to locate Birbie's position. Then he sensed it, a current of air beginning to form. He quickly turned into said direction.

"Well done, Tofurang! Sludge Bomb!" Davern said.

Tofurang spat a barrage of purple globs towards Birbie, just as the Eden Bird Pokemon was about to launch another Air Cutter. The two attacks met, and like it happened before, Tofurang's overpowered Birbie's. This time Birbie didn't have the chance to dodge, and the poisonous missiles smashed into his little body with such force, they made him fall down against one of the rocks.

"Good job, Tofurang! One more hit, and this fight will be yours!" Davern cheered.

Ash looked at Birbie, who had luckily fallen on top of one of the boulders scattered around the battleground, rather than the ground. Thankfully, Birbie could still move, and tried to get back on his feet, but such a direct attack had made a number on him.

"Come on Birbie! I know you can do it!" Ash desperately encouraged his Pokemon.

Gathering what little strength he still had, he stood up and shook the grime off of his feathers. Thankfully, the attack hadn't resulted in poisoning, or else he would have been done for. Though, despite Birbie's resolve to keep fighting was admirable, everybody could see that his strength didn't match it.

Ash took very little time and effort to earn Birbie's loyalty. The little bird Pokemon was eager to learn, and Ash had much to teach. And in return, Birbie would fight for Ash to the best of his ability, and win for him. This was an important battle, and if Birbie lost, he'd let Ash down, or that's what he thought, at least. And such thing was unthinkable in the Eden Bird Pokemon's mind.

"Biiiiiir... biiiiiir..." Birbie began, breathing heavily, as he eyed Tofurang, who was starting to slowly blink, his eyes overcoming the effect of Flash.

"Birbie...?" Ash asked worriedly.

There was a crackling sound, and Birbie's body began to glow white and blue. Birbie then began to grow and change. When the light disappeared, in Birbie's place there was a completely different Pokemon.

"Aveden!" the new Pokemon whistled.

"Whoa, look at that! Birbie just evolved!" Bonnie excitedly said.

Serena pulled out her Pokedex, and scanned the new Pokemon.

"Aveden, the Bliss Bird Pokemon, and Birbie's evolved form. Normal/Flying. The blue feathers on its chest reflect light. They use flashes to communicate with one another in the forest canopy."

While he retained the same color scheme, Aveden couldn't be more different from Birbie: Aveden had still mostly dark blue feathers and beady light blue eyes, but his body was no longer a sphere with tiny wings, as he had now a slim, svelte body with a small head connected to it by a neck. The feathers on the head flared upwards towards the end, and there was a golden crest above the eyes that made him look like he was wearing glasses. His wings had grown considerably, and a yellow tail extended from the rear end of his body.

"Yes! Awesome!" Ash cheered, pumping his fist into the air. "Well done, Aveden!"

"Av, av!" Aveden whistled, just as happy.

"Amazing. Your Aveden's determination to win was so strong, he broke through his limits in order to evolve and gain more power," Davern said, half shocked and half amazed by the development. "Though, that won't change the outcome of this fight! Tofurang, Sludge Bomb again!"

"Tof!" Tofurang cried, as he assaulted Aveden with another barrage of sludge missiles.

Before Ash had any time to call for a counter, Aveden opened his beak, and fired a greenish-silvery beam of light that pretty much tore through the globs of grime as if they were mere water, before impacting Tofurang in the face, resulting in a brief flash of silvery light, causing the Poison-type to cry in pain once again, forcing him to close its eyes shut.

"Blinded again!?" Davern asked, incredulous.

"That was Mirror Shot! Not only did you evolve, you learned a new move!" Ash said, his excitement so big his body was shaking. "Now, let's finish this, Aveden! Lift Tofurang from the ground with Gust!"

"Av, aveden!" Aveden whistled, as he began to flap his wings, blowing air in Tofurang's direction.

A tornado quickly formed around Tofurang, which began to lift it from the ground. The poor blinded Pokemon began to kick with all its four legs, as confusion and fear took hold of his mind.

"Now finish it with Quick Attack!" Ash called.

Aveden stopped flapping, and dived towards the airborne Tofurang, leaving a trail of fading white light in his wake. Aveden's body smashed against Tofurang, and the Cave Beast Pokemon was sent crashing down against the ground, landing with such force, it opened a crater.

Tofurang made no attempt to get back to his feet. The referee raised a flag in Ash's direction.

"Tofurang can't fight anymore, Aveden is the winner!" the referee declared.

Davern's face was that of shock, but he quickly chuckled, shook his head, and recalled his fallen Pokemon. "Good work, Tofurang. Take a good rest."

"Yes! Way to go, Ash and Aveden!" Bonnie cheered, as she bounced up and down excitedly. "Just one more Pokemon to go!"

"If Ash plays his cards right, I'm sure he can win this," Clemont confidently said. "Davern is down to his last Pokemon, and was clearly counting on wearing Ash's Pokemon down with Toxic Spikes, but Ash was able to fight his way around such a handicap."

"Yeah. This battle going much better than his first match against Maria," Serena said, though she didn't allow herself to feel relieved. It was obvious that whatever Pokemon Davern saved for last, it would be far from a pushover. Maria had already proved that her strongest Pokemon could match Ash-Greninja, and she was sure that Davern would be no different.

Davern unclipped his last pokeball from his belt. "Well, so far, you managed to do pretty well against me. Maria didn't praise you for nothing. You've proved to be a pretty excellent trainer. Let's see if you're good enough to defeat my last Pokemon. Drilgann, time to shine!"

The capture device opened up, releasing Davern's last Pokemon, which landed on the ground with a loud thud.

"Dril!"

Drilgann was a large, four legged Pokemon with brown fur, except its legs, which were purple. It had a long snout like a mole, with two yellow tusks ended on drills sticking out of it. Its eyes were covered by a star-shaped purple mask. There were three yellow drill-shaped claws at the end of each leg, and its tail was a large, conical yellow drill.

They couldn't help but notice a silver ring on one on its tusks, which had a small black and purple gemstone embedded on it.

Both Ash and Serena pulled out their Pokedex to scan this new Pokemon:

" Drilgann, the Drill Pokemon, and Modrille's evolved form. Ground/Dark. Often used as beasts of burden, a Drilgann can tunnel many miles in a single day without getting tired. Their claws can be spun individually to drill with precision."

All of them remembered the Modrille that the Rangers had temporarily tamed to clear the rocks blocking Owten Nook. Though

since they didn't saw them fight, they didn't know what to expect from their evolved form.

"Aveden versus Drilgann, begin!" the referee shouted.

"Aveden, begin with Mirror Shot!" Ash commanded.

"Oh no, you're not blinding us again! Counter with Dark Pulse!" Davern replied.

Birbie fired yet another greenish silvery beam of energy towards Drilgann, while the Drill Pokemon casted a stream of dark and purple energy from its mouth towards Aveden. Both attacks clashed, and struggled to push the other back, resulting in a small explosion when either of them failed to overpower the other.

"That Drilgann is indeed strong. But we're stronger! Aveden, Air Cutter!" Ash called.

"Ve, ve!" Aveden whistled, as he flapped his wings, releasing mutiple blades of compressed air towards the Drill Pokemon.

"Drilgann, avoid them with Dig!" Davern called.

Drilgann jumped into the ground as if it were diving into water, and sunk just as easily. The drills on its claws and tusks easily allowed the Drill Pokemon to burrow underground much faster than any other Pokemon.

"Aveden, stay alert! Try to keep enough altitude from the ground do it can't reach you!" Ash told the Bliss Bird Pokemon.

"That won't be of any help. Rock Slide!" Davern shouted.

Suddenly, the ground below Aveden exploded, and multiple large rocks were fired upwards, as if they were propelled by some underground geyser. The startled Aveden did everything he could to avoid them, but one of them hit him in the wing, causing him to spiral down towards the ground.

"Aveden, no! Try to gain more height!" Ash pleaded.

"Drilgann, use Dragon Claw!" Davern ordered.

This time, it was Drilgann itself who burst from underground, one of its claws rised and glowing with green energy. The Drill Pokemon's claws smashed against Aveden, and the poor Bliss Bird Pokemon was sent crashing against a nearby rock, before it slid to the ground.

"Aveden!" Ash cried again.

Aveden had both his wings and legs sprawled open, hiss beak also opened and his eyes rolled into his skull. It was obvious he wouldn't be fighting anymore.

The referee raised a flag in Davern's direction. "Aveden can't fight any longer, the winner is Drilgann!"

Ash sighed in defeated, and recalled his regional bird. "You did your best, buddy. Now let others pick up the slack."

"What a pity," Clemont said. "I was hoping on Aveden softening Drilgann for Greninja before going down, but he wasn't able to land a single hit."

While somebody would ask why Ash would choose Greninja, it was obvious it was Ash's only good option left: Colarva was too weak and lacked training, and as strong as Pikachu was, it was better to go for as much advantage as possible against such a powerful Ground-type.

Ash unclipped his last pokeball, reared it back, and weirdly enough, took a couple seconds to toss it, as if he was calculating its trajectory.

"Greninja, I choose you!" Ash said.

The pokeball landed next to a large rock, and released Greninja right on top of it. Davern couldn't help but smirk.

"Clever. Really clever, Ash," the Gym Leader chuckled.

"Greninja, try not to touch the ground! You'll be poisoned if you do!" Ash warned his Kalosian starter.

"Gre," Greninja said, looking at the ground around him warily.

"And there he is. Your famous Greninja," Davern began. "Maria gushed a lot about that Pokemon. I can't wait to see what is he capable of."

"I'm sure you won't be disappointed," Ash stated.

"Greninja versus Drilgann, begin!" the referee said, starting the deciding match.

"Alright Drilgann, let's test this Greninja's might with Rock Slide!" Davern commanded.

"Quickly, dodge them!" Ash told the Ninja Pokemon. "Remember not to touch the ground!"

Drilgann raised its head and growled, and several large boulders appeared above Greninja, who quickly hopped from the rock he was standing on to another. Drilgann generated even more boulders, forcing Greninja on the defensive. However, Greninja had no trouble avoiding the attack, hopping from one rock to another with so much grace, he almost looked as if he was floating.

"Get close to it and use Aerial Ace!" Ash shouted.

"Gre!"

"Defend with Dragon Claw!" Davern replied.

Greninja continued to jump from one rock to another, until he managed to reach Drilgann. The Drill Pokemon had raised on its hind legs and rose one of its forelegs to prepare the Dragon-type move, but Greninja was much faster, and struck it in the face with a

white glowing arm, before landing on another rock, causing the Dragon Claw to hit nothing but air.

"Drilgann, use Dark Pulse!" Davern shouted.

"Deflect it with Night Slash!" Ash shouted back.

Turning towards the Ninja Pokemon, Drilgann opened its mouth and fired yet another black and purple beam of dark energy. Greninja, meanwhile, generated a sword of the same color between his hands, and used it to parry the beam, who split into multiple, smaller beams that flew in different directions, leaving the Kalosian Pokemon untouched.

"Great! And now, Water Shuriken!" Ash said, thrusting a punch forward.

"Drilgann, dodge them with Dig!" Davern shouted.

Greninja leaped in an arc above Drilgann, and formed two watery stars on each hand, before tossing them at Drilgann below. The Drill Pokemon once again dived into the ground, but it wasn't fast enough to dodge the Water Shuriken. Both liquid projectiles hit it while it was burrowing underground, producing a blast of water that interrupted the move and pushed Drilgann backwards, leaving it soaked. Meanwhile, Greninja landed on one of the nearby rock formations.

Davern let out a sigh. "Man, Maria wasn't exaggerating when she told us about what a beast your Greninja was," the Gym Leader said, scratching his forehead. "My Drilgann has power, but the difference in speed between our Pokemon makes that power useless. Not to mention that, with the type advantage, your Greninja hits hard too. If this match were to continue as it is, you'd defeat me easily."

"Thank you for your kind words," Ash replied, before he smirked at Davern. "Though, I have the feeling you aren't saying this because you want to concede, are you?"

Davern smirked back, as he pulled a pickaxe from his utility belt. "Of course not. What kind of Gym Leader I would be if I folded so easily? Plus, I said you'd defeat me if this match *continued as it is*," Davern emphasized the last four words, as he lifted his pickaxe to his eye level. Ash and his friends could see that there was something embedded at the top of the pick, something round with many colors.

"Is that...?" Bonnie began.

"Yes. A Keystone," Clemont said.

"Well, remember what Maria said: Mega Evolution is pretty big in Tandor," Serena reminded them.

Davern touched the Keystone with two fingers. "Now, Drilgann, dig deep within your being, and bring out all your hidden power to the surface! Mega Evolve!"

The Keystone and the Mega Stone on Drilgann's fang began to glow, and both of them fired bolts of light towards each other. The beams clashed, merging into a single one, and Drilgann began to change its form, as the Mega Evolution helix flashed in front of it. Once the light went out, they could all see Drilgann's new appearance.

"So that's a Mega Drilgann..." Ash said, narrowing his eyes at the Ground and Dark-type Pokemon.

Mega Drilgann's body was now more human-shaped, standing on two large and very stocky legs. Its body was also stocky and round shaped, with two yellow triangle marks with purple trims above a third mark that looked a like a purple grin, making it appear as if it had a face on its belly. Two large conical, yellow drills grew from its shoulders.

"Drill!" Drilgan roared, making his shoulder drills spin menacingly.

Ash, however, wasn't intimidated. "Your Drilgann surely looks like a tough challenge, I'll give you that. But there's no challenge touch

enough for Greninja and I working together! Come on Greninja!"

"GRE-NINJA!"

A spinning tower of water formed around Greninja, as he morphed into his advanced form. Once the metamorphosis was complete, all the water condensed into a shuriken that stuck to the Ninja Pokemon's back.

"You're about to learn why Drilgann is the king of the caves of Tandor!" Davern excitedly said, as he waved his pickaxe at Ash. "Drilgann, Sandstorm!"

"Gann!" Drilgann crossed his arms in front of its face, before spreading them outwards, and a sandstorm formed around him, spreading to encompass the whole battleground.

"G-Gre!" Greninja braced himself as he felt the damaging effect of the sand pelting his body.

"Don't you love sand? It's soft, smooth and soothing. And it can get everywhere!" Davern said.

"You'll need more than mere sand to defeat us! Greninja, Water Shuriken!" Ash said, thrusting a hand forward.

Greninja jumped into the air, took the large shuriken stuck to his back, and tossed it towards Drilgann. Davern merely watched as the watery star flew down towards his Pokemon.

"Dodge it," he simply said.

Then, much to everybody else's shock, Drilgann vanished from the spot, moving so fast it turned into a brown, yellow and purple blur, and the Water Shuriken missed its mark.

"What?" Ash asked, dumbfounded. Davern smirked at his reaction.

"Drilgann, use Dragon Claw on Greninja before he can land on one of the rocks!" Davern commanded.

Drilgann leaped towards Greninja, both claws already cloaked in green draconic energy, and before the ninja Pokemon could parry or block, Drilgann delivered a brutal slash, sending the Kalosian starter crashing towards the ground with such force, he opened a crater.

"Greninja, no!" Ash cried, his body wincing as he felt the pain Greninja was subjected to.

Shaking off the pain, Greninja managed to jump back to his feet, but winced in pain as a flash of purple washed over his body.

Davern crossed his arms, and his smirk widened. "Sorry, but no more playing The Floor is Lava for Greninja."

"What? What did just happen?" A confused Bonnie asked. "Drilgann was super slow before, and now it can keep up with Greninja!"

"Did Mega Evolution increase its speed that much?" Serena asked, studying Mega Drilgann with her eyes. "It doesn't seem much faster now than it was before."

"If you ask me, I'd say Mega Drilgann's ability is Sand Rush. It's an ability that boosts a Pokemon's speed during a sandstorm. Hence why Davern ordered Drilgann to summon one the moment it Mega Evolved," Clemont explained. "Most cave Pokemon aren't known for being fast, and Ash had been using his Pokemon's superior speed to his advantage. And now Davern threw a wrench to that strategy."

"And Greninja is now poisoned..." Bonnie said worriedly.

"Yes. Between the sandstorm and the poison chipping away his health, Greninja is now on a time limit to defeat a Pokemon that's both fast and hits hard," Clemont summarized. "Ash and Greninja have a very uphill battle ahead of them..."

Serena held her hands worriedly as she looked at Ash and Greninja. Still, her faith didn't waver. *"Come on Ash and Greninja, I know you can do it..."*

"Drilgann, Drill Run!" Davern ordered.

"Drilgann!" Drilgann said, as it dashed towards Greninja like a rocket, shoulder drills already spinning, ready to pierce Greninja with one of them.

"Greninja, parry it with Night Slash!" Ash replied.

Once again, Greninja formed a black and purple sword of energy between his hands, and used it to parry one of the drills. The spinning drill grinded against the sword of darkness, producing a shower of purple sparks in every direction.

"Get rid of him with Aerial Ace!" Ash commanded.

Greninja's legs started to glow with a white light, and once he pushed Drilgann's backwards, he jumped and delivered a double kick to the bipedal mole's face, pushing him even further back.

"Now Water Shuriken!" Ash added.

Another shuriken of water formed on Greninja's back just as the frog Pokemon reached to grab it, and tossed it towards the still reeling Drill Pokemon.

"Dodge it with Dig!" Davern countered.

Once again, Drilgann dived into the ground, this time much faster than before, and was completely burrowed in by the time the Water Shuriken reached its position, which harmlessly passed over him.

"Greninja, be careful, it can't come out from-"

Ash didn't even have time to warn his Pokemon as Drilgann burst from underground in front of Greninja, and buried one of its shoulder

drills onto Greninja's exposed belly. Ash doubled over upon feeling the same pain Greninja was experiencing, but forced himself to endure it.

"G-Greninja, Double Team!" Ash ordered, clutching his abdomen.

Greninja winced in pain, and his body flashed purple, suffering the effects of the poison and the sandstorm, before he summoned a myriad of copies of himself across the battleground, much to Drilgann's confusion. However, the sandstorm took little time to dispel those copies.

"Double Team is also useless?" Ash growled, as he clenched both fists.

"Drilgann, Rock Slide!" Davern ordered.

Drilgann rose its arms and conjured a multitude of boulders above Greninja -this time, far larger and in bigger numbers- before motioning its arms down, letting gravity take hold of the giant boulders. Ash didn't need to tell Greninja to dodge, as the Ninja Pokemon quickly began to run away, as the boulders landed with deafening noises. Some of them fell on top of each other, forming small mounds.

"Greninja, try to get close to it and use Water Shuriken!" Ash commanded.

Greninja nodded, and fighting off the pain of the sandstorm and the poison, moved towards Drilgann as he ran away from the falling boulders. He reached back as a watery star formed on his back, took it, and tossed it at Drilgann.

"Drilgann, avoid it with Dig!" Davern shouted.

Once again, Drilgann disappeared underground before Greninja's attack could reach him. This time, however, Ash knew what to do to avoid the attack. His eyes drifted to a pile of rocks that had formed

from Drilgann's Rock Slide. The window of opportunity was small but Ash had faith Greninja could do it.

"Greninja, jump on top of that mound of rocks!" Ash ordered. Greninja nodded, and quickly leaped to the top of the pile, before Drilgann could emerge and attack from underground. Davern had used such strategy to avoid Dunsparce's underground attacks, so why couldn't it work for Ash as well?

"GANN!"

The answer came in the form of Drilgann bursting from under the pile of rocks, grinding them to pebbles with its powerful drills on its shoulders and claws as if they were clay, and slamming into the surprised Greninja.

"Not a bad plan. But as you can see, there's no obstacle my Drilgann can't drill through," Davern proudly said, before he adjusted his mining helmet. "The match appear to be going my way, Ash. I know you aren't going to surrender but... seeing what your Greninja can do, and his current state, I just can't imagine what you guys can do to turn the tides of the battle."

"Don't count us out yet!" Ash said, gritting his teeth. *"This is pretty bad! I can feel every strike Greninja takes, and that Drilgann hits like a truck! And with the sandstorm and the poison, Greninja doesn't have much time yet. And that speed! Not only it's fast moving, it's also fast to dig underground and then attack from below! Greninja doesn't have any attack that can stop this sandstorm or to force Drilgann out in the open. Not that he'd be able to use it, given that it attacks so fast that... hey, wait a minute, tha's it!"*

"Drilgann, Dragon Claw!" Davern ordered.

"Greninja, parry it with Night Slash!" Ash replied, sounding far more confident than a couple moments ago.

Drilgann barreled towards Greninja, its rotating yellow claws glowing with green energy. Greninja blocked the first strike with his sword of dark energy, the countered with a thrust that was also blocked, followed by a claw swipe from Drilgann which was dodged.

"Greninja, Aerial Ace!" Ash shouted. "Use both arms and legs!"

The sword of darkness disappeared, and all four of Greninja's limbs started to glow with a white light. Dodging the next claw swipe, Greninja delivered a series of slaps, slashes and kicks to Drilgann's face and body, pushing it backwards.

"Now, Water Shuriken!" Ash said.

"Drilgann, Dig!" Davern said, sounding almost exasperated. "You already tried that tactic many times, why do you think it's going to work now?"

And indeed, Greninja's Water Shuriken once again missed Drilgann, who had burrowed underground rather quickly. Ash smirked, knowing that the enemy had taken the bait.

"Greninja, jump into the air and toss another Water Shuriken down!" Ash shouted.

Davern opened his eyes wide. "What? Wait, Drillgan-!"

It was too late. A second after Greninja jumped into the air and formed another Water Shuriken, Drilgann emerged from that same spot, ready to slash Greninja with its claws, but they only hit thin air. Greninja then tossed the water projectile downwards, hitting Drilgann this time. The Water Shuriken exploded into a torrent of water that blasted the Drill Pokemon backwards, and left it completely soaked.

"YES! Now Greninja, more Water Shuriken!"

Beads of sweat ran through Greninja's body as he could hear his heart beating faster and faster. He knew that his body was running

on fumes, but he was also close to victory as well, so he continued pelting Drilgann with Water Shuriken, throwing and generating them as fast as he could. With each hit it took, the Drill Pokemon was more and more disoriented.

"Aerial Ace!" Ash said, making a chopping move with his arm.

"Block with Dragon Claw!" Davern ordered.

All four of Greninja's limbs glowed white, as he dashed towards the Mea Evolved Pokemon. A slash to the face, a kick to the sides, dodge Drilgann's Dragon Claw, then deliver more chops and punches to the sides, finishing with a powerful roundhouse kick to the face that ended up launching the large Ground and Dark-type Pokemon towards a large rock with such force, it was completely shattered.

"Drilgann... !" Davern cried.

The sandstorm subsided. Drilgann's body flashed for a second, as it reverted back to its original form. The Drill Pokemon lied there, not making any attempt to get back on its feet or even move.

The referee raised a flag in Ash's direction. "Drilgann can't fight any longer! The winner is Greninja! And since Davern has lost three Pokemon, the winner of the match is Ash!"

"YES!" Ash cheered.

"Pika!" Pikachu joined as well.

"G-Gre..." Greninja wheezed, as he reverted back to normal, and fell to one knee.

"Greninja!" Ash shouted, as he rushed towards his barely standing Pokemon. "You're on your last legs, aren't you? Between the poison and that sandstorm..."

"... ninja," Greninja said, shaking his head, as if trying to downplay the situation.

"You wanted to fight until the very end, don't you? Thanks a lot, Greninja. You're everything a trainer could ask for," Ash said, before pulling out Greninja's pokeball. "Take a rest. We'll take you to the Pokemon Center as soon as possible."

"Gre..." Greninja said, as he allowed the pokeball to suck him in.

Meanwhile, Davern walked towards his fallen Drilgann, and returned it to its pokeball as well. "Thank you, Drilgann, for such a memorable fight."

"Ash!" Serena shouted, completely elated, as she, Clemont and Bonnie ran towards him. "You won! Congratulations!"

"Yeah! It was such an amazing battle!" Bonnie added.

"There were times where I thought you were going to lose, but I knew that you would somehow come out on top," Clemont said.

"Thanks a lot, guys," Ash said, before scratching his cheek and chuckling a little. "Though, I have to admit, it was a close one! I also thought I was going to lose quite a few times myself, hehe..."

"Pika," Pikachu said, shaking his head.

"But you didn't," Davern said, as he walked towards him. Despite losing, the Gym Leader looked rather happy, oddly enough. "Not only did you keep fighting, but managed to keep a cool head in order to find a way to counter my tactics and grasp victory. Maria certainly wasn't exaggerating when she showered you in praise."

"Uh, thank you," Ash said, reddening a little. "I'm glad I was able to make a good impression on you guys."

"Though, I'm sure you didn't come here seeking flattery, did you?" Davern chuckled, as he reached into a pocket of his utility belt. "For

defeating me in an official match, I hereby give you the Bright Gem Badge."

Davern extended his open hand at Ash, letting Ash pick the badge on his palm. Ash looked at the badge: it was an hexagonal ruby with silvery borders.

"Thanks a lot, Davern," Ash said, before dramatically raising the badge over his head. "I won the Bright Gem Badge!"

"Pi-Pikachu!"

"And that makes two badges," Clemont said.

"Yep! Only six more to go," Ash said, as he placed the Bright Gem Badge on his badge case, next to Maria's Normal Badge.

"Given that you came from the west, I guess you're going north?" Davern asked.

"Yeah, though we aren't going to leave Burole just yet," Ash clarified. "There's going to be a contest soon, and Serena is going to take part on it."

"But yeah. Once we're done with that, we're heading towards Bealbeach City," Clemont added.

"Clemont has been hired to work on that new power plant," Bonnie proudly supplied.

"Bealbeach, huh? In that case, I'll give Cali a call and tell her to expect you," Davern said. "I was going to suggest you go to Amatree town, but you'll have to take a detour, and I imagine you don't want to take too long to reach the new power plant. Guess you can always go to Amatree later."

The match finally over, Davern walked the group of kids towards the exit of his gym.

"I wish you the best of luck fighting the other Gym Leaders. And good luck to your friend on her contests as well," Davern said, before a thought dawned upon him that made him turn all giddy. "Oh, that reminds me! If you guys are going north, that means you'll have to cross Comet Cave! Oh, you guys are going to love it! Trust me, it's nothing like Passage Cave!"

"Er... sure, thanks for the... recommendation," Clemont awkwardly said.

"Though, now that I won my second Gym Badge, Serena needs to win her second Ribbon!" Ash said, as he turned towards her. "Come on Serena! We need to train a lot if you want to be ready!"

"Y-Yes!" Serena agreed, as she and the rest of the group returned to the Pokemon Center.

Author's Note: And that makes two badges Ash has! Yay!

Gotta say, I enjoyed writing this battle far more than the one against Maria. I love when battles have heavy strategic components such as non-damaging moves, and between the Toxic Spikes, Sandstorm, and the irregular battleground, this allowed for a battle that was much more than an exchange of attacks with a dodge or two thrown in. This is a standard I'll aim to keep for future Gym battles.

This battle also marks the first time one of the newly caught Pokemon evolves, and as it couldn't be otherwise, it was Birbie, Tador's very first capture. I know a lot of people have a justified dislike of Ash's Pokemon evolving mid-battle and then winning, myself included, given that it makes luck into a much bigger factor for victory. Though, I hope the fact that Aveden didn't win the final, decisive battle somewhat alleviates it.

Speaking of the final battle, another concern I'm pretty sure some of you are having is Greninja, given that this is the

second time that Ash uses him to defeat the Gym Leader's ace. Sadly I didn't have much of a choice, since at this point Greninja is still his most reliable option. There is Pikachu, but I really can't see Pikachu winning against a Mega Evolved Ground-type, while also dealing with Toxic Spikes and Sandstorm. I mean, Greninja barely won, and he had type advantage. But yeah, I promise you that by the time we reach the third Gym, Ash's other Pokemon will be strong enough so he won't have to rely on Greninja all the time to win.

Thanks to Fox McCloude, Guest #1, Viroro-kun, hirowriter, DryBonesKing, Jay and Guest #2 for reviewing. Also special thanks to Viroro-kun for his help on this chapter (as well as every past chapter), whose edits and suggestions made it so much better (also, the joke of Bonnie calling Davern a caveman comes from him).

Now that Ash has his second badge, it's time for Serena to compete for her second ribbon, which we'll see the next chapter. In the meantime, don't forget to leave a review on this chapter. Remember, reviews are the food of the fanfiction writer, so don't be afraid to share your thoughts with me, no matter how short.

Race for a Ribbon

Chapter 14:

Race for a Ribbon

Burole Town Outskirts

"Let's do it again Braixen! Psybeam!" Serena ordered.

"Braaaaai..." Braixen began, her eyes glowing with a multicolored light. "... XEN!"

Braixen fired a blue, pink and white beam of psychic energy towards the sky. The attack didn't hit anything, but it did scare a bunch of Birbie and Owten, which flew away from the attack.

"Very good, Braixen! You have Psybeam down!" Serena praised while clapping at her starter Pokemon.

Following Ash's victory over Davern, the group had remained on Burole Town, mostly helping Serena train for the upcoming contest. At first they used the battleground next to the Pokemon Center, but as the days passed and the Contest was closer and closer, more and more people arrived the town, and thus the battleground wasn't as readily available as it was before, so they were forced to move towards other zones to train. Fortunately, the greenery surrounding the town provided plenty of spots.

Serena had been focusing on training Braixen and Selkid, given that they were the Pokemon she had chosen for the Contest Battle Round. She was confident that Pancham and Minicorn would ace the Appeal Round with the performance she had come up for them. It was the dusk of the last day before the contest, and Serena's Pokemon were finalizing their training before their big day.

"Alright Selkid, now it's your turn!" Serena excitedly said. "Show me your Ice Beam!"

Selkid nodded, and took a deep breath. "Seeeeel..." Selkid opened her mouth, and a white glowing orb covered in light blue mist formed in front of her. A small beam of the same color fired from the orb, before it petered out and shattered as if it was made of thin glass, before Selkid starting to cough white mist from her mouth.

"Selkid!" Serena cried, as she and Braixen quickly went to see if the Sea Nymph Pokemon was okay.

Thankfully, Selkid stopped coughing after Serena patted her back twice. The Water and Fairy-type sighed, and slumped her head.

"Aw, don't get discouraged. You did much better this time around," Serena assured.

"Brai, brai!" Braixen added, nodding.

Serena had been training both Braixen and Selkid to learn new moves. However, while Braixen made noticeable progress with Psybeam, Selkid was having much more trouble trying to master Ice Beam.

"Braixen is a Pokemon with lots of experience and training on her back. Meanwhile, you only got Selkid for a few weeks now," Clemont explained. "Of course Braixen is going to have an easier time learning new moves than Selkid."

"Come on Greninja, Ice Beam!" Ash's voice said.

Serena turned in the direction of Ash's voice, who was standing next to Greninja, both of them looking towards a large rock.

Greninja cupped his webbed hands, forming the same chilly white orb of frigid energy, before thrusting both hands forward, firing a thick beam of white and light blue colors. The beam sailed through the air

until it impacted the rock, covering it in a sheet of ice and frost in less than a second.

"Well done, Greninja!" Ash praised, offering his fist to the Kalosian starter, whom he bumped back. "Now you have another weapon in your arsenal."

"Gre!" Greninja said with a nod.

Selkid couldn't help but feel a little discouraged upon seeing Greninja mastering the same move she was struggling with so much.

"Don't feel bad, Selkid. I'm sure if you keep training, you'll get it down eventually," Bonnie said, patting the head of the small water type.

Unfortunately, Bonnie's encouragement didn't have the effect the young girl was hoping for. Her mouth making a rather adorable pout, Selkid decided to try Ice Beam one more time. She opened her mouth and formed the orb of cold, but in her impatience, the orb exploded in her face, knocking her on her back and covering her head and the upper half of her body in frost.

"Selkid!" Serena cried, as she quickly went to help her Pokemon get back on her feet. "Come on Selkid, don't be so forceful. It will get you nowhere."

"Braix," Braixen agreed with a nod. She ignited the tip of her wand, and started to wave it around Selkid, slowly melting the frost covering her.

"... kid," Selkid sighed sadly. She then saw Pikachu walking towards her.

"Pikapi, pi, pika pikachu pi!" Pikachu began, moving his arms emphatically as if he was trying to explain something to Selkid. Selkid intently listened to the Mouse Pokemon, nodding at times. It reminded the humans of how Pikachu helped Birbie master Gust when he had struggles with it. Did Pikachu also know the secret

behind Ice Beam? Pikachu then looked at Greninja. "Pika?" he asked, almost as if looking for confirmation.

"Ninja," Greninja laconically said with a nod.

While Selkid looked ready to give it another try, her trainer had another plan. Serena stood up, and looked into the horizon. Only half the sun was visible, meaning that it would be night soon. "I think we trained enough for today. Let's go back to the Pokemon Center," she said, much to Selkid's disappointment.

"Yeah," Ash said, looking at Selkid. "You won't be able to put on a good show if you don't eat well and have a good night of sleep."

"Pikapi," Pikachu added, nodding.

"Sel..." Selkid reluctantly agreed.

...

The next day, the group got up early, went to the Center's cafeteria to have a good breakfast, and headed towards the Contest Hall. As expected, there was already a pretty long line for the ticket booth.

"It seems that no matter when we get up, there's always a line," Bonnie complained, crossing her arms. "Do these people camp in front of the Contest Hall or something?"

"Maybe we should start doing that," Ash joked, before chuckling a bit. "Thank goodness there are no lines for Gym Battles..."

"Pika..." Pikachu shook his head.

"I wish I could stay here and make you company so the wait is more bearable, but I better get going, so I can get my Pokemon ready," Serena said, as she began to walk away from the line and towards one of the hall's back entrances.

"See you inside!" Ash said, as he waved at her.

With Serena out of sight, the two teenagers and the lone girl looked at the line, who appeared to advance rather slowly. Clemont estimated it would take about half an hour until they got to the booth. Which, admittedly, was an improvement over the almost three quarter of an hour they had to wait for the previous contests.

"You know, maybe we should try to bring something to do while we wait in line," Bonnie suggested in an annoyed tone.

"I know, but there's not that much that can be done while we're in a queue," Clemont replied.

"Oh boy, I just forgot how long these lines used to be," a new voice said, one that sounded oddly familiar, which belonged to an adult man. "Hey guys, look who's here!"

Ash, Clemont and Bonnie turned around, and saw Richard, followed by the rest of the Dunsparce Gang bikers.

"Richard!" Ash said, happy to see the biker.

"Hey there, kids. Such a surprise meeting you here," Richard greeted them. "How's going?"

"It couldn't be better. A few days ago, I defeated the Burole Gym Leader," Ash proudly said.

"And now our friend Serena is going to take part in this contest, and we're going to cheer her," Bonnie explained.

"Nene," Dedenne added.

"Yes, no wonder I was missing a member of your group," a female blond biker, Amber, said as she shoot a glance at the trio. "The girl with the honey blonde hair and black beret, right?"

"That one, yeah," Ash said.

"And what are you guys doing here? Are you guys going to see the contest too?" Clemont asked, his question carrying an edge of incredulity. It was hard to picture a bunch of tough bikers being interested in something like Pokemon Contests.

"Why, of course we're here to watch the contest," Richard replied. "Just like you, one of our own takes part in it, so we're going to cheer for her as well!"

"HUH?"

...

Serena didn't even need to be told the location of the coordinator's dressing rooms. Most contest halls had more or less the same layout, and after being in quite a few, it was now imprinted on the Kalosian girl's mind.

When she reached the changing room, she saw quite a few people on it, some already in their contest costumes and with their Pokemon out, others still in their casual clothes. Of course, Serena knew that it was still relatively early, and the final number of contestants would be roughly twice what there was now before her eyes.

She scanned the small group of people, as if trying to look for a familiar face, either be Vitor or Sayaka, though the honey blonde was hoping to avoid facing the rude ninja girl. Then again, neither of them appeared to be present. Though, fate would arrange it so Serena would meet again with a familiar face.

"Hey there, Serena!" a feminine voice said behind her. "So cool to see you here!"

Surprised, Serena gasped and quickly turned around, and was face to face with a tall, smiling dark skinned girl dressed like a biker. A girl she had met some time ago in Kevlar Town. She looked at the Kalos native expectantly, as if waiting for Serena to make the connection.

"Wait a minute... Aisha?" Serena asked, recalling the name of the biker girl from memory. The two of them had fought together during the raid in the Team Omega Hideout at the outskirts of Kevlar Town.

"You remember me! Good!" she laughed.

"What are you doing here?" she dumbly asked, and the second those words left her mouth, she squaked in embarrassment, her face tinting pink. "Sorry, I mean-"

Aisha pretended to be in deep thought, placing her finger under her chin. "Now that's quite a good question. Here we are, inside a contest hall that's about to host a contest in less than an hour. What could I possibly be doing here...?"

"Sorry," Serena repeated, her eyes downcast. "It's just, well... I didn't expect somebody like you to be a coordinator..."

"Because I'm a biker, right?" Aisha asked, though thankfully she didn't sound offended. "Yeah, I know I'm not what most people would picture when they imagine a coordinator, but hey, I'm a multifaceted person!"

Serena chuckled in response, her embarrassment slowly disappearing as Aisha's positive demeanor eased her nerves. "Still, it was wrong of me to make such an assumption."

"Hey, relax, it's not that big of a deal," Aisha said, slapping Serena's back. "Besides, even if it was, I couldn't be angry, given that it's thanks to you that I can do contests again!"

"Huh? T-Thanks to me?" Serena repeated. "What do you mean?"

Aisha rolled her eyes, but smiled. "Well, contests have this little rule that bans you from taking part in one if there's an arrest order against you. Not that I could have taken part in one anyway, with the gang and I constantly on the run from the Rangers," she explained.

"But now that you and your friends helped clear our names, I can finally return to the contest halls!"

"I'm glad to hear that I was able to help you that much," Serena said, smiling back.

"So, how are you doing? Did you win any Ribbon already?" Aisha asked.

"Of course! I won my first ribbon a few days ago," Serena said, as she proudly showed the taller girl her open ribbon case with her first ribbon on it.

"Cool. Check out mine!" Aisha said, showing Serena her case.

The Kalosian girl's eyes opened wide upon seeing three ribbons inside. She choked. "T-Three!? You have three ribbons already?"

"Relax. They're from last year's season. Didn't I tell you that I've been unable to compete for quite some time until now? I don't think anybody who started from zero could have three ribbons so early into the season," Aisha told her, a bit amused upon seeing Serena's reaction. "Thank goodness these things don't have an expiration date, or else all the effort I poured into winning them would have gone down the drain..."

"Still, if you manage to win those, you must be a rather skilled coordinator," Serena praised her.

"Thanks. I like to think I am, but given how long I've been without doing contests..." Aisha began, as she rubbed an arm. "I kept up with my training whenever I could, but it's not the same. Guess today we'll see if I'm that rusty or not."

As they talked, Serena noticed that more and more coordinators entered the dressing room. Looking at one of the clocks on the walls, Serena realized that the contest would start soon.

"Say, there's not much time until the contest begins. I think we should go and get changed," Serena suggested. "We can continue our talk in the waiting area."

"Sure thing. Let's go."

...

Sometime later, Ash, Clemont and Bonnie were on their seats, waiting for the contest to begin. They managed to get good seats in the middle area that provided a decent view of the stage. Sitting behind them were the entire Dunsparce Gang minus Aisha.

The murmurs and humming of the public turned into a loud cheer as Jillian walked into the stage. Once she was in position, a pair of spotlights cast their light upon her.

"Ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to the Burole Town Pokemon Contest! I'm your host, Jillian Meridian," she began, and the crowd exploded into loud cheers. "Thank you! Also give a warm welcome to the judges that will evaluate our wonderful coordinators: Kevlar Town's own Nurse Joy, the Venesi City Gym Leader Rosalind, and the S-Class connoisseur Ambrose Reigns!"

People applauded when Jillian mentioned the two women, but the clapping became noticeably more subdued when Ambrose was mentioned.

Jillian then went to explain the rules of the Pokemon Contests for those in the public not aware of them, and then showed the ribbon the contest winner would take with him or her, finishing off with introducing the very first contestant, beginning the Appeal Round.

And thus, the contest began. Coordinators walked in and out of the arena one after the other, showing both the public and the judges what their Pokemon were able to do. Some where good, others bad, and everything in between. Then again, most of them managed to get a positive reaction from the public.

...

In the waiting area, Serena and Aisha, already changed into their contest outfits, were looking at the performances from one of the monitors hanging from the ceiling. Something drew Aisha's attention, though.

"What's wrong with that Ambrose guy? Does he ever say anything nice?" Aisha asked.

"Don't you know him?" Serena asked, titling her head a little.

Aisha shook his head. "Last year, the third judge was this little old guy that only said 'remarkable' to absolutely everything. I later heard that the guy had a case of extreme senility and the poor sod wasn't aware of where he was or what was going on, so they sent him to an asylum," she explained, making Serena grimace a little. "And from what I'm seeing they took this guy with a colossal rod up his butt as a replacement."

"That reminds me, you should-"

Serena was interrupted when one of the monitors showed a picture of Aisha with the words "NEXT CONTESTANT" written under it.

"Well, it's my time to shine! Wish me luck!" Aisha said, more giddy than before, as she walked out of the coordinator box and into the stage.

"Wait! Ugh..." Serena sighed upon seeing the biker disappear behind the exit door. "I hope she doesn't take Ambrose's words too seriously..."

...

"And now, let's welcome with a big applause to our next coordinator! She's a veteran from the contest circuit that due to... unfortunate misunderstandings with our law enforcement," Jillian began,

sounding a bit uncomfortable saying those words. "Has been unable to compete. But today, she makes her triumphant return to the contest scene! From Kevlar Town, Aisha of the Dunsparce Biker Gang!" Jillian said, and the spotlight fell onto Aisha as she made her way towards the stage.

"There's our Aisha!" Lou, Aisha's uncle, shouted. "Show them what you're made of!"

"Go Aisha! We're with you!" Amber cheered.

"Wipe the floor with all of them!" Richard hollered.

"Whoa, look at that outfit!" Bonnie gushed, leaning forward in order to see it better. "So cool!"

If Aisha's contest outfit reminded everybody that she was a biker, it was much more stylish than the deliberately torn clothes she normally wore: her outfit consisted on a long sleeved black leather jacket with a large pink pokeball symbol emblazoned on it, cut above her stomach, exposing her toned abs, a miniskirt of the same color and pink trim decorated with pink stars on its left side, and a pair of thigh high boots, also black, with a pink streak running vertically.

Aisha unclipped two pokeballs from her belt, and tossed them forward. "Alright, Dunsparce, Umbreon, gear up!"

Dunsparce's pokeball released a torrent of dark blue flames that formed a vortex, and the Land Snake Pokemon emerged from it, while Umbreon emerged from a flurry of golden stars.

"Dunsparce, fire a Water Pulse into the air! Umbreon, hold it in place with Psychic!" Aisha ordered.

"Dun!" Dunsparce cried, as it opened its mouth, forming an orb of water, which it launched it upwards.

Meanwhile, Umbreon's eyes glowed pink, and an aura of a similar color appeared around the watery sphere, keeping it floating into the air.

"More Water Pulses!" Aisha added.

Dunsparce fired three more Water Pulses, which Umbreon caught with Psychic. One of them was held still, with the other three spinning around it.

"Now, freeze them with Ice Beam!" Aisha said.

Dunsparce did so, firing a white beam of cold energy, freezing all four orbs into spheres of crysaline ice.

"And now, let's go for the big finish! Dunsparce, Thunderbolt on the three spinning ice orbs! Umbreon, Dark Pulse on the one in the middle, but don't drop the Psychic!" Aisha said, her order followed by several gasps from the public.

"And Aisha risks a rather complicated maneuver!" Jillian excitedly commented. "Will it pay off?"

"Aisha didn't win all her ribbons by playing it safe," Ash could hear Lou say behind him.

Dunsparce's body crackled with electricity, before firing three electric bolts towards the orbiting spheres of ice, linking them through chains of yellow lightning. Umbreon opened its mouth, and fired a stream of black and purple energy towards the central orb, which was split into three smaller beams, hitting the three outer electrified ice spheres.

The frozen orbs burst into explosions of crystalline ice, electric sparks and tendrils of dark energy. The audience was in awe upon seeing such a creative show of lights and shadows.

"And done!" Aisha announced, causing the public to break into a loud applause.

"That's our little girl! Whohooo!" Amber loudly cheered, causing Clemont to wince.

"Show them how we do it in the Dunsparce Gang!" Richard added just as loudly.

"And Aisha makes quite the powerful return with an amazingly complex performance involving multiple elements that has the public captivated!" Jillian commented. "Now let's see if the judges are just as impressed!"

The spotlight first fell on Burolle Town's Nurse Joy, who looked rather pleased. "This performance has showed us that her time away from contests hasn't dulled Aisha's or her Pokemon's skills in the slightest."

The spotlight fell on the white and black haired Gym Leader next. "Proprio così! I do remember your performances from the last season, and they're just as impressive!" Rosalind kindly said.

The spotlight then moved towards Ambrose, which had many people hold their breath. Unlike Rosalind and Nurse Joy, Ambrose was a new addition to the judge panel, and thus Aisha wasn't familiar with him and his rather... peculiar style of assessing performances.

"You think you may have done pretty good since you got quite the warm reaction don't you? Well, just because you're able to impress simple minded people with low standards means crap in the world of contests," Ambrose began with his usual caustic flair. "Do you know why people taking part in contests are called 'coordinators'? Because that's what's required of them and their Pokemon, coordination. And your Pokemon lacked it. All they did was launch a bunch of attacks into a single point and produce a bunch of flashy explosions. But I imagine that you are unable to teach your Pokemon anything more refined or sophisticated. And your Pokemon are probably too dumb and boorish to learn it. After all, trainers tend to pick Pokemon who are similar to them."

Once Ambrose was done with his scathing review, a deafening silence reigned over the contest hall. The connoisseur leaned back on his chair, proud of his words, while Aisha just stayed there, her jaw clenched and eyes downcast.

Behind him, Ash could feel the temperature rapidly dropping, as well as hearing the sound of low growls and knuckles cracking.

"What are you still doing there? Come on, shoo, there are more sad attempts of coordinators that need to be evaluated," Ambrose said with a dismissive hand wave.

"What the *fuck*..." Aisha hissed, as she raised her eyes, fixing Ambrose with such a hateful stare, it made him flinch. "... did you call my Pokemon!?"

Then, much to everybody's shock, Aisha began to stomp her way towards Ambrose. The connoisseur's bravado disappeared, his face turned pale, and quickly stood up.

"Hey there, miss, what do you think you are doing...?" Ambrose fearfully began, raising his arms defensively.

"Uh, Ms. Aisha, you shouldn't-" Nurse Joy began, but Aisha didn't listen to her.

"COME HERE YOU PIECE OF SHIT!" Aisha yelled, as she ran towards Ambrose.

The man squeaked in terror, and quickly ran away from there, Aisha chasing after him. The public was confused: some people applauded and cheered Aisha for being the one to finally stand up to the detestable man, while others were distraught over the thought of what Aisha might do to him.

"Attacking a judge is a serious offense! I can get you banned from contests for life!" Ambrose shouted as he ran away.

"I'M NOT GOING TO HURT YOU, I ONLY WANT TO TALK!" Aisha unconvincingly yelled, as she continued the chase. "NOW STOP RUNNING YOU WALKING GARBAGE IN HUMAN SHAPE!"

...

Aisha and Ambrose ran three laps around the stage before the coordinator finally gave up the chase. Thankfully for Aisha, the Contest Hall security let her go with a warning, and was allowed to continue with the contest if she behaved, which she begrudgingly agreed to.

"Hey," Serena greeted Aisha as she saw the biker walk back into the waiting area.

"Hey," she grumbled.

"Sorry, I wanted to warn you not to take whatever that man says seriously," Serena told her, as she patted her on the shoulder. "He's like that with pretty much everybody. I heard that caustic critics tend to cause some sort of fascination with the audience."

"I thought he was just a tough nut to crack," Aisha said, before visibly slumping. Now that the adrenaline fueled by her anger had worn off, the biker could realize what she just did. "I made a fool of myself out there, didn't I?"

Serena smiled at her. "I'm sure a lot of people thought that guy needed to be brought down a peg, and were rooting for you to do so."

"If you say so..."

"Well..." Serena said, rubbing the back of her head in a way that would have reminded her of Ash if she saw herself on a mirror. "... I certainly felt that way. I still remember the first time I was at the end of his scathing comments. He almost brought me to tears."

"Still, it was a bit embarrassing, letting myself lose control like that," Aisha insisted. "Though, I don't care what he or any other dumbass says about me, I'm thick skinned. But when somebody insults my Pokemon... now that's crossing a line."

"That's something I can agree with," Serena said.

Serena's name then appeared on the screen that signaled who was next on the Appeal Round.

"Well, my turn. Wish me luck!" Serena said, as she skidded towards the exit.

"You go, girl!"

...

"And our next coordinator is Serena from Vaniville Town in Kalos!" Jillian announced.

Serena entered the stage, waving at the public who welcomed her with a warm appaluse.

"There she is! Come on Serena, you can do it!" Ash cheered, pumping his fist.

Two pokeballs were already on her hand, and tossed them forward. "Pancham, Minicorn, go!"

The capture devices hit the ground and opened. Pancham appeared among a storm of pink and red hearts, while Minicorn emerged from a vortex of pink rose petals.

"Cham!"

"Corn!"

"Now Pancham, ride on top of Minicorn, and Minicorn, start running around the stage!" Serena commaned.

Pancham leaped into the air, gracefully landing on Minicorn's back, who reared back and let out a high pitched, cutesy neigh, before she started galloping, raising a small trail of dust behind.

"Now Pancham, show everybody your acrobatic skills!" Serena said.

"Cham-Pancham!" Pancham said, as he began to do handstands, both with two and one paws, while keeping perfect balance, all while Minicorn continued to gallop, though she slowed down when she reached one of the edges of the stage for the second time.

"Hey, not bad! Wonder how that Pancham would do with a motorbike instead of a foal," Ash heard Richard say.

"So that's what Serena had been practicing in secret!" Bonnie said, watching Pancham riding Minicorn with stars in her eyes.

"Makes sense. She'd need way more space for something like that than a mere battleground could provide," Clemont said in realization.

"Do you think Serena will let me ride Minicorn too?" Bonnie asked her older brother, though her question went unanswered.

"Excellent! Now Minicorn, throw Pancham into the air with Fairy Wind!" Serena ordered.

Minicorn stopped, and Pancham jumped high above him. Minicorn's horn started to glow pink, and waving it like a wand, it crated a powerful twister of pink wind with white sparkles that launched Pancham even higher. The Playful Pokemon curled into a ball and began to spin as he moved in an arc towards the opposite end of the stage.

"And contrary to her usual spiel, Serena delights the public with a skilled acrobatic number!" Jillian commented, as the public began to cheer.

This made Serena smile with even more confidence. "Pancham, use Stone Edge when you land! Do it the way we practiced!"

As expected, Pancham landed on his feet with no trouble. Both Pancham and Minicorn, at opposite sides of the arena, began to run towards each other. Pancham, however, stopped after a few meters, and slammed both paws into the ground, raising a row of stone pillars of blue shining rock. Each column was shorter than the one before, as if forming a slope.

It soon became obvious why of such odd Stone Edge when Minicorn jumped onto the top first and shortest pillar, and began to hop from one pillar to another, until she reached the highest one, and used it as a springboard to jump even higher.

"Charge Beam while you're in the air!" Serena shouted.

Minicorn's horn started to crackle with yellow electricity, and began to fire multiple lightning bolts in many directions while she soared through the air, much to the public's awe.

"Now Pancham, another Stone Edge to help Minicorn land!" Serena called.

"Cham!" Pancham said, repeating the same action as before. Except this time, the row of rising stone pillars was growing in height rather than decreasing.

Minicorn landed on the highest pillar, and hopped on the others until she finally got to ground level.

"And finish!" Serena said.

The public's ovation was deafening, much to Serena and her Pokemon's joy.

"Quite the delightful performance!" Jillian joyfully said. "Now let's see what the judges have to say about it!"

The spotlight fell on Nurse Joy, who looked satisfied with what she saw. "Teamwork is very important on performances involving two Pokemon, and Pancham and Minicorn worked so well together!"

Next, it was Rosalind's turn. "Not to mention, making sure one Pokemon don't overshadow the other, the two of them must be in perfect balance, and neither of them felt eclipsed by the other!"

And usual, they saved Ambrose for last. Ash wondered if, after what Aisha attempted to do, he'll try to restrain his usual caustic comments, or if, knowing Serena, he'd know that she wouldn't try something violent. "I don't know if you realized that this is a contest, not a rodeo, so save those embarrassing numbers for less refined spectacles. At the very least you didn't go half assed with it and also provided a rodeo clown to complete the picture."

Ash didn't know if Ambrose was calling either Serena or one of her Pokemon a clown. Serena didn't do anything, and ignoring Ambrose as best as she could, recalled her Pokemon and walked back towards the waiting area.

...

A smiling Aisha welcomed Serena back in the Contestant's Room.

"Good show out there! I loved how you had your Pancham ride your Minicorn!" Aisha said, slapping the Kalosian her on her back. "That was a very original trick."

"Thanks," Serena replied.

"Maybe for the next time, you could get Pancham a toy motorbike. I could teach him how to ride it and do some sick moves!" Aisha excitedly said.

"Uh, thanks, but I think I'll continue to have him ride Minicorn," Serena politely declined. "Though, why don't you use that idea? You're the biker."

"Oh yeah. Well, the case is, all my Pokemon either walk on four legs or... they don't have any legs at all," she said, chuckling a little. "So yeah, neither of them can ride a bike."

"It's a pity. I suddenly had this mental image of you riding your bike into the stage, followed by a Pokemon also riding a little bike," Serena said, giggling.

"Maybe I should keep that idea for future contests," Aisha replied.

The two girls continued to talk amicably as they watched the few remaining coordinators that had to perform in the Appeal Round. Time flew by, and before either girl realized, the Appeal Round finished.

"And thus the Appeal Round comes to a close!" Jillian announced. "While we had quite a lot of talented coordinators and Pokemon today, but sadly only eight can pass to the next phase! According to the judges, these eight are the coordinators that scored the highest!"

Everybody held their breath as their one by one, the faces of the eight finalists appeared on the screen. Serena managed to score second place, followed by Aisha's third. Once all eight finalists had been revealed, the rest of the contestants either sighed in defeat, or groaned loudly, lamenting having been eliminated already.

"Yes!" Aisha shouted, pumping her fist into the air. "Onto the next phase! I wasn't as rusty as I feared."

"And third position, no less! Of course, your display was amazing, so you didn't deserve any better than the top half," Serena added.

"Now, let's see which opponent our talented coordinators will have to battle against!" Jillian continued. The eight portraits began to shuffle for a few seconds, before they were paired up.

"Look at that," Serena said, eyeing the brackets. "It seems that the two of us will only fight if we both make it to the finals."

"In that case, make sure you reach the finals, you hear me?" Aisha said. "I want my grand return to the contest circuit to be something worth remembering, and a contest battle against you would be the icing on the cake."

"I'd love to fight you in the finals as well," Serena said, before she shoot the biker a look filled with resolve. "Though, don't think I'm going to be an easy opponent."

Aisha couldn't help but smile. "I'd hate if you were."

...

"Yes! Serena passed!" Bonnie cheered.

"Nene!" Dedenne cheered as well.

"It's not that surprising that she did," Ash said, his joy more subdued but still visible. "Serena is past the point of being eliminated in the Appeal Round."

"Still, the anticipation of wondering if Serena is going to pass or not is still there," Clemont pointed out. "Many of the other coordinators also put on amazing showcases, so the possibility that Serena might not make the cut is always there."

Needless to say, the Dunsparce bikers behind them began to cheer and holler loudly the moment Aisha's picture appeared among those who had passed to the second round.

"Yes! That's our Aisha!" Amber shouted.

"Come on girl! Show everybody who's the boss of this contest!" Lou tearfully added.

"Now, let's start the second phase of the contest, the Contest battles! Our first pair of coordinators are Aisha, from Kevlar Town, and Jonathan, from Hearthome City in Sinnoh!" Jillian annouced, as both coordinators made their way towards their spots in the battleground.

Naturally, the moment Aisha stepped into the spotlight, the rest of the Dunsparce bikers cheered wildly.

Then, much to Clemont and Bonnie's surprise, the battleground began to shift, changing from the usual dirt terrain, to a large pool with a few islets on it. However, they didn't have to wait much for an answer..

"Coordinator Aisha has requested a water battleground, since she's going to use Pokemon that don't do well on dry land!" Jillian said.
"Now, present your Pokemon!"

"Arbok, Tubjaw, gear up!" Aisha said, tossing two pokeballs forward.

Aisha's first Pokemon was her Arbok, which emerged among a bunch of loud red and yellow fireworks and landed on one of the islets. The other Pokemon, emerging from a vortex of ice crystals, was a blue fish-like Pokemon with a rhomboid main body, a long and narrow head just as big, black eyes with bright green irises, and a huge mouth full of sharp teeth of the same color. It had two small dark blue fins to the side and a tail of the same color.

"A new Pokemon," Ash said, as he pulled out his Pokedex to scan it.

" Tubjaw, the Jaw Pokemon. Water/Dark. They are able to unhinge their jaws in order to swallow prey larger than their head. Their teeth are sharper than razors."

"Boy, Aisha really has a thing for Pokemon with menacing appearance and sharp teeth," Clemont pointed out.

"Not all of them. She used an Umbreon and a Dunsparce during the Appeal Round," Ash countered.

Her opponent, Jonathan, was a boy with short dark blue hair, wearing a bright green tuxedo with a yellow tie and a light red shirt underneath. He sent his Pokemon, a Roselia and a Kirlia.

The battle began. Aisha's fighting style was pretty aggressive and quick, attacking relentlessly and never giving the opponent any chance to breathe. Arbok was pretty swift and sneaky, both on solid ground and on the water, and her Tubjaw was a great swimmer. She often used combos involving one of her Pokemon tossing a foe towards the other, which would greet it with a powerful blow. Such excellent teamwork was appreciated by the judges.

Such strategy took no time to net Aisha her first win, as her opponent's Pokemon quickly fainted after taking so many blows.

"Roselia and Kirlia can't fight anymore! The winners are Arbok and Tubjaw!" Jillian announced. "And thus, Aisha moves to the semifinals!"

The crowd erupted into wild cheers, and those coming from the Dunsparce Gang were the loudest among them. Ash, Clemont and Bonnie also rooted and cheered for the biker girl.

Serena's fight was third. It was against a girl with green hair tied in a ponytail, wearing a short red and white dress. The girl used a Cocoran and another Pokemon neither Ash or Serena had seen before. It was a small snail Pokemon with blue body and a brown shell. The shell had three bumps on it, making it look like a small castle.

" Cassnail, the Castle Pokemon. Ground/Water. It dissolves minerals in sand and uses them to form a hard carapace on its back. It lives in coastal regions." The Pokedex explained.

Serena's opponent was a tough cookie. Even if her Pokemon didn't appear to threatening, her strategy of using Sandstorm to hamper Serena's Pokemon, combined with her reliance on Ground, Water and Grass type moves, the former two supereffective against Braixen and Selkid being weak to the later, proved to be rather effective. Then again, Serena's Pokemon eventually prevailed, and like Aisha, she passed to the semifinals.

Aisha's next battle was against a girl who, oddly enough, was dressed like a shepherd, staff included. She used a Mareep, and another sheep Pokemon with black wool, gray skin, a blue muzzle, red eyes, and two stump-like horns growing at the sides of its head.

"Baashaun, the Hard Horn Pokemon. Dark/Fighting. Its wool is prized as fiber for extra-rugged clothing. However it is much harder to raise than its docile cousin Mareep." The Pokedex droned upon scanning the new Pokemon.

Nevertheless, the sheep duo fell before the might of Aisha's Pokemon.

Serena had to fight against a girl with a Cubbly and a Kinetmunk in the second semifinal, who proved to be easier to beat than her first opponent.

That would mean that Serena and Aisha would fight each other in the finals for the Burole Ribbon. As per usual, there was a reprieve of ten minutes so both coordinators could rest a little. Some people took advantage of the pause to go to the bathroom or just stand and stretch their legs. Eventually, the ten minutes went up, and the two finalists walked towards the stage, whose battleground was shifting to accommodate Aisha's Pokemon.

"That friend of yours is pretty skilled, no point in denying it," Richard began. "But sadly, there is nothing she can do against Aisha."

"Aisha is indeed pretty good and her Pokemon are strong, but she's going to need much more than mere strength if she wants to beat Serena," Ash retorted back.

"Now, the moment you have been waiting for!" Jillian excitedly announced. "The Burole Town Contest final battle! On one side, we have Serena, from Vaniville Town, Kalos!"

The public cheered, Ash, Clemont and Bonnie being the loudest. Pikachu and Dedenne cheered as well.

"And on the other side, from Kevlar Town, Aisha!" Jillian continued.

The public cheered once again, the members of the Dunsparce Gang being even louder than Serena's friends had been just a moment before.

"Coordinators, present your Pokemon!"

"Braixen, Selkid, go!" Serena said, tossing her pokeballs forward.

Braixen emerged from a torrent of flames, while Selkid appeared among a vortex of clear water, the two of them landing on one of the battleground's platforms.

"Arbok, Tubjaw, gear up!" Aisha said, sending her Pokemon to battle, Arbok landing on another platform, while Tubjaw appearing on the water with a splash.

"Five minutes on the clock! Begin!" Jillian shouted.

~Serena (Braixen, Selkid) VS Aisha (Arbok, Tubjaw) ~

"Those who strike first, also strike twice, and that will be us!" Aisha energetically said, throwing a hand forward. "Arbok, Sludge Wave!"

"Shaabak!" the Cobra Pokemon hissed, as it expelled a wave of black and purple sludge from its mouth.

"Braixen, counter that with Flamethrower! Selkid, get behind Braixen!" Serena ordered.

The two Pokemon did as commanded. Braixen aimed the tip of her ignited wand towards the wave of incoming sludge, casting a stream of fire towards it, setting it ablaze in a bright flash of red and orange, causing both Serena, Aisha and Jillian to shield their eyes. This action cost Aisha some of her points.

"Tubjaw, now! Aqua Jet!" Aisha ordered.

"Jaw!" the fish Pokemon said.

Before Serena could react, a missile of water rocketed out of the pool, striking Braixen right on her abdomen and pushing her aside, leaving Selkid in the open. Serena's points dropped to the same amount as Aisha's.

"Now Arbok, strike Selkid with Thunder Fang!" Aisha commanded.

Arbok quickly slithered towards the Sea Nymph Pokemon, as its fangs crackled with electricity, yellow sparks pouting from its mouth.

"Selkid, defend yourself with Hyper Voice!" Serena countered.

"Seeeeeeeel-KIIIIIIID!" Selkid yelled, weaponizing her voice into a sound based attack.

"Cancel that and jump into the water, Arbok!" Aisha quickly countered.

Arbok's Thunder Fang was interrupted, as the Cobra Pokemon jumped into the pool, just in time to avoid a stream of destructive soundwaves. The dodged attack cost Serena more points.

"And Aisha keeps pressure with a relentless offensive, while also dodging all of Serena's attempts to counterattack!" Jillian excitedly commented. "What will Serena do now?"

"How about this, then?" Serena replied the announcer's rethorical question. "Selkid, freeze the water of the pool with Ice Beam!"

"Oh shit!" Aisha cursed.

"Kid!" Selkid said, opening her mouth and forming a white sphere of chilling energy in front o it. However, rather than a beam, it shot a cone of freezing energy that created a block of ice, before the attack petered out, leaving the Sea Nymph Pokemon with a coughing fit. Needless to say, this costed Serena even more points, whose score

was now below three quarters. Tubjaw had jumped back into the pool, leaving Braixen free to rejoin Selkid.

"You gave me quite the scare there, you know that?" Aisha said, sounding mildly irritated. "I wasn't counting on your Pokemon having Ice-type moves, given that I didn't see you use any in the previous matches. Oh well, one less thing to worry about. Arbok, Thunder Fang! Tubjaw, Ice Fang!"

Both the Cobra Pokemon and the Jaw Pokemon jumped from opposite sides, the former Pokemon's jaws once again overflowing with electricity, and the latter's being covered in ice, with white mist coming out of it.

"Braixen, defend with Hidden Power!" Serena replied.

"Brai brai!" Braixen cried, as she waved her wand around her in circles, summoning a series of basketball-sized spheres of energy that constantly shifted color, forming a spinning shield around the two Pokemon. Arbok and Tubjaw slammed into the impromptu barrier, and were pushed back into the water.

"Oh shit!" Aisha said, grabbing her temples.

"And Serena manages to counter with a creative use of Hidden Power!" Jillian excitedly said.

"And that's not all! Selkid, jump into the water and use Hyper Voice!" Serena continued.

Selkid jumped into the pool making a little splash, and let herself sink. As she descended, she sensed a shift in the water, warning her that Arbok and Tubjaw had noticed her and were swimming towards her. Before they had any chance to attack, Selkid opened her mouth and released powerful soundwaves. The attack proved to be much stronger than it ever was on dry land, causing the water in the pool to stir so much, it almost looked like a sea storm, while Aisha's

Pokemon were blasted away, with the former getting out of the water and jumping into one of the platforms.

Aisha's points dropped even further, being a little over half.

"Serena makes an intelligent use of the water battleground by using it to cast a very powerful Hyper Voice!" Jillian excitedly commented. "Allowing Serena not only to close the gap in points but switch it in her favor!"

Bonnie was a little confused at Jillian's explanation. She tugged her brother's sleeve. "Hey Clemont, why did that happen? How is that Hyper Voice is more powerful underwater? Is because Selkid is a Water type?"

"No, it has nothing to do with that. You see, soundwaves travel much faster through liquid than through air. That means that sound-based attacks like Hyper Voice will be much more effective underwater," Clemont explained.

"Really? I didn't know that," an amazed Ash said. "Science is so amazing!"

"Pi..." Pikachu said, patting his head.

"How could you not know that? It's basic physics!" Clemont replied, incredulous.

"Hey, I'm a grown man and I didn't know that either," Richard protested. He looked at Aisha. "And I don't think Aisha knew it either."

"Yeah, that Tubjaw has it tough. Unlike Arbok, it can't get out of the water," Clemont observed.

"Aisha is pretty smart, though. She'll figure a way to counter that move," Amber said, her confidence in her fellow biker unwavering.

Back on the battleground, Serena was planning to press on her advantage, now that she had finally turned the tides of the battle.

"Braixen, quickly, use Psybeam on Arbok!" Serena ordered.

"Brai-XEN!" Braixen said, her eyes glowing with a blue, pink and white light, before firing a beam of swirling energy of those very colors.

"Sha?" Arbok asked, who had just got out of the water, as it just noticed the super effective attack sailing towards it.

"Tubjaw, intercept that attack, now!" Aisha shouted.

Despite the damage taken from Selkid's underwater Hyper Voice, the Jaw Pokemon heard its trainer and was able enough to continue the fight. Tubjaw leaped out of the water, getting in the way between the Psychic attack and its partner, successfully blocking the former and saving the latter. Aisha's defense shaved off some points of Serena's score, but the girl from Kalos was still in the lead.

The biker girl looked at the time, and gritted her teeth. She had less than two minutes to turn around this before the buzzer rang.

"Alright, time to break out the big guns then! Tubjaw, get out of the water and hop onto Arbok's head!" Aisha commanded. The fish Pokemon did as it was told, using its fins to get a hold of Arbok's head. "Excellent! Now Arbok, use Seed Bomb! And Tubjaw, Dark Pulse!"

"Shaabak!"

"Tub!"

Arbok opened its jaws, releasing a barrage of melon-sized seeds, while Tubjaw exhaled a stream of black and purple energy. The two attacks combined, resulting in a salvo of darkness-coated seed missiles.

"Braixen stop that attack with Fire Blast!" Serena ordered.

The ignited tip on Braixen's wand burned with more intensity, as the Fox Pokemon aimed her weapon forward, releasing a giant wall of flames shaped like the kanji of fire. The two attacks clashed against each other, producing multiple explosions as the Seed Bombs detonated prematurely. However, much to Serena's shock, several of the projectiles managed to push past Braixen's fire attack, flying towards the two Pokemon.

"Braix!"

"Sel?"

Much to Selkid's surprise, Braixen pushed the smaller Water-type behind her, shielding the Sea Nymph Pokemon with her own body. The darkness-enhanced Seed Bombs smashed against Braixen, and the Fox Pokemon was engulfed in a multitude of small explosions of green and purple colors.

"Braixen!" Serena cried, as she watched her Pokemon drop to one knee. She didn't even notice that her points had dropped even further, now being less than half.

"Well, your Pokemon is pretty brave, and her sense of loyalty towards her partner is admirable, I'll give you that," Aisha said, the tone of her voice revealing she was genuinely impressed.

"Sel? Selkid!" Selkid said, watching the bruised and battered Braixen with eyes wide open. "Sel!?"

"B-Brai..." Braixed said, forcing to smile at the smaller Pokemon.

Selkid then put herself in front of Braixen, almost acting as a human shield.

"Man, look at that. You're making me feel like shit for what I'm going to do next," Aisha said, scratching her temple. "But I really want that

ribbon, so sorry if I come as too rough. Tubjaw, Arbok, back into the water! Tubjaw, use Surf!"

"Tuuuub!" Tubjaw said, as it hopped from Arbok's head, and got into the water with a splash. From underwater, the Jaw Pokemon raised a huge wave in the middle of the battleground, just behind Arbok. The wave cast a large shadow over Braixen and Selkid.

Serena looked at the forming wave in horror. That attack would surely knock Braixen out, weakened as she was, and there's no way Selkid would be able to continue the fight alone. They needed to stop that attack, and right now, only one thing could do it.

"Selkid, use Ice Beam to freeze that wave!" Serena said, causing the Sea Nymph Pokemon to look at her, as if Serena was expecting for her to pull a miracle. "Come on Selkid, I know you can do it! You have a lot of power hidden inside you, and you trained a lot! A mere Ice Beam is nothing for you! Don't be afraid!"

Selkid looked at Serena, before looking at Braixen, who had took the brunt of a combined attack to protect the Sea Nymph Pokemon, still struggling to get back to her feet. She then looked at the incoming wave, and wiped expression of fear and uncertainty from her face, replaced by one of resolve.

"Saaaaeel... !" Selkid opened her mouth once again, forming an white orb of freezing energy in front of it. "KID!"

Focusing on the wave, Selkid released the energy stored inside the orb, this time being released in the form of a jagged and slightly wavering energy beam, but unlike the previous attempt, this time it didn't peter out or go out of control. The beam hit the wave, freezing it into a wall of ice.

"Now she can use Ice Beam!? This has to be a goddamn joke!" Aisha shouted, bringing her hands to her head.

"It seems second time's the charm, as Selkid's successful Ice Beam had stopped Aisha's attack on its tracks!" Jillian commented.

On the scoreboard, Aisha's points dropped, even if she was still on the lead. Meanwhile, Braixen had mustered the last of her strength, got back on her feet, and picked up her wand.

"Now, Braixen, use Psybeam on that wall of ice!" Serena ordered, thrusting a hand forward.

"Braiiiiii!" Braixen cried, as her eyes once again glowed with a multitude of colors, before firing a beam of psychic energy from them.

The beam sailed towards the wall of ice unimpeded, shattering it into a thousand tiny shards, revealing a stupefied Arbok behind it.

"We're not giving up! Tubjaw, Arbok, use the Seed Bomb and Dark Pulse combo again!" Aisha shouted.

"Braixen, counter with Hidden Power! Selkid, freeze the orbs with Ice Beam!" Serena replied.

Once again, Tubjaw jumped on top of Arbok's head as the Coobra Pokemon fired a salvo of large explosive seeds, before Tubjaw exhaled an inky beam of dark energy, coating them in a cloak of shadows. Meanwhile, Braixen summoned a multitude of multicolored orbs and sent them to meet the incoming attack, while Selkid used Ice Beam to cover them in frost.

The two attacks clashed against each other, resulting in a beautiful explosion of green bits, tiny ice shards and dark purple sparks.

"Arbok, get close and-"

BZZZZZZZ!

"And time's up!" Jillian announced, giving both Serena and Aisha pause, the two coordinators completely engaged in the battle. After

realizing what was going on, they both looked at the scoreboard, holding their breath. "And the winner of the match, and thus winner of the Burole Contest is..."

The two finalists weren't the only ones who directed their eyes towards the scoreboard, as the entire public did so as well.

Aisha retained a third of her points. Serena had a little over that.

"... Serena!" Jillian announced, as the scoreboard shifted to show Serena's picture, with pictures of her two Pokemon under it, and the word WINNER in bold, capital letters.

Serena let out a squeal of joy, as she quickly rushed towards her exhausted Pokemon.

"We did it! We won!" Serena said, scooping Braixen and Selkid into an effusive hug. "Thank you guys! You were truly amazing!"

"Brai..."

"Sel!"

Naturally, Aisha's mood had completely plummeted. She was this close to make her big comeback, and had her victory snatched away from her at the very last second. Needless to say, her Pokemon were just as upset.

"Hey, you did a great job, nothing to be ashamed of," Aisha said, sounding half chastising and half encouraging, as she rubbed their heads affectionately. "We'll continue training, so next time we'll do even better."

"Well said," Serena said as she walked towards her rival, startling the biker a little. The Kalosian girl extended her hand. "It was a good battle, Aisha."

Aisha smiled, if weakly, and gave Serena's hand a rather strong shake. "I thought I could come and take the ribbon, but guess we

were rustier than I thought."

Serena shook her head. "Nonsense. You made me push my Pokemon to their very limits. And yours fought splendidly. Not to mention that you made it to the very finals despite how long you've been out of the contest circuit. I'm afraid to think how our battle would have ended if you weren't as rusty as you claim to be. Which I assume we'll learn the next time we meet again in a contest, right?"

Aisha's smile widened, becoming more genuine. "You can bet we will."

A few minutes later, Serena was standing on a small podium, Braixen and Selkid flanking her, with the three judges and Jillian next to her. This time, it was Rosalind who handed her the opened case with the ribbon.

"Congratulations for your victory, ragazza," the Gym Leader said, allowing Serena to grab the ribbon inside it. "Here's the Burole Ribbon."

Serena grabbed the ribbon. She looked at it for a moment, before rising it above her head. "Ta-da! I won the Burole Ribbon!" she cheered, and the public broke into a loud applause.

"And thus, the Burole Town Contest comes to an end! I hope you have a great time, and see you next time!" Jillian said, officially ending the contest.

...

Moments later, the group was outside the contest hall. Ash, Serena, Clemont and Bonnie were standing in front of the whole Dunsparce Gang, sitting on their bikes.

"Hey Serena, even if I lost..." Aisha began, averting her rival's gaze, before looking at her and smiling. "I really had a great time fighting you. It would have been better if I won, but oh well."

"Thank you. I also enjoyed our match as well, even if there were moments when you made me panic," Serena said, causing Aisha and all the bokers to chuckle.

"Hey, what's a competition without good rivals to keep each other sharp?" Ash rhetorically asked.

"Yes. You showed me that I still have a long way to go if I want to achieve my dreams. But the Dunsparce Gang isn't afraid of long ways," Aisha replied. "You better stay at the best of your game. It would be a shame if I defeated you just because you slacked off."

"I can assure you, that's something you won't have to worry about," Serena assured her.

Aisha smirked. "Good to hear that."

And with that, all the Dunsparce Gang bikers turned their bikes around and drove away, the noise their vehicles made growing fainter and fainter until they couldn't be heard anymore.

"Guess there's nothing left to do on this town anymore," Ash surmised. "Should we continue our journey to Bealbeach City?"

"Yeah. It will take us some time to get there, and I'd hate to make Lilia wait more than necessary," Clemont said. "What's the fastest route to reach there?"

Serena opened her tablet, and checked the map function.

"According to the map, we should head east, take Route 4, cross the Comet Cave, then turn west towards Rochfale Town, and then move north."

"We're still pretty far away from it," Bonnie said, before perking up and looking at Clemont. "Oh well, the more time we get to spend with you before you have to go to the power plant!"

Clemont couldn't help but chuckle. "Heh, you always see the bright side of a situation, Bonnie."

"Rochfale Town holds contests, but I'm afraid that there are no Pokemon Gyms until we reach Bealbeach City," Serena said, looking at Ash. "At least, if we don't take a detour."

Ash shook his head and smiled. "The Gyms aren't going anywhere. I don't mind having to wait a little in order to get my hands on the next badge. Let's take that route."

The decision made and the path to their next destination chosen, the group left Burolle Town behind, ready to continue their journey through Tandor and see what else the region had to offer.

Author's Note: And thus, Serena gets her second ribbon! yay!

So, you guys remember Aisha? She appeared in chapter 9, but I don't blame you if you forgot about her, given that her part there was pretty small. But yeah, she was meant to be another of Serena's rivals. I like her in that she's pretty different from the usual coordinator rival, being a rough biker and all that. Well, I hope you liked seeing her as much as I enjoyed writing her. While it will be a while, Aisha will be back in the future for more.

Check out the Ao3 version for a picture of Aisha in her regular and contest clothes.

We had two contests pretty close to each other (and both of them with Serena as the winner), but rest assured, I'm not going to rush Serena's contest arc. Plus, there's going to be a pretty big stretch before we get to the next contest (if you played the game, you'll know how long the distance between Burolle and Rochfale is). Not to say that the following chapters are devoid of events. In fact, I'm sure you're going to love them.

Thanks a lot to Fox McCloud, Guest, Hirowriter and Viroro-kun for reviewing last chapter, and thanks to Viroro-kun for his help on this chapter, whose edits and suggestions made it so much better.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and if you did, please leave a review saying what you thought about it (even a simple "good job" is enough for me). See you next time!

Cats: The Not-Musical

Chapter 15:

Cats: The Not-Musical

Route 4 - Baa Grasslands

With Ash's second badge and Serena's second ribbon, the group finally left Burole Town behind and continued their journey through Tandor by taking Route 4, also known as the Baa Grasslands. It was a fairly long route that connected Burole Town with Comet Cave, as well as Route 10. However, for the time being, the group would head towards the former.

As the name implied, the Baa Grasslands were mostly green grass fields, plenty of shrubbery, and small forests, with nothing but a natural-formed path that wasn't green. The route was also split in two by a river that led to the sea. Fortunately, there was a sturdy wooden bridge that allowed safe passage to the other side.

To the east, they could see some more beaches, with palm trees growing on them, not dissimilar to the beach they had spent the day in while they traveled Seabreeze Way. This time, though, they felt it would be for the best if they didn't spend time playing around in the sand. Baa Grasslands was a long route, and the quicker they crossed it, the better. They've been walking for two days, and they hadn't even reached the halfway point.

"Boy, we've been traveling for two days straight, and we're nowhere close to Comet Cave," Bonnie complained. "Maybe we should have asked those bikers to give us a ride..."

"Come on Bonnie, where's the hurry?" Serena asked. "I thought you didn't mind a long travel since that means more time with your brother before he goes his separate way."

"Yeah. Where's your sense of adventure?" Ash asked. "You should enjoy the sights of each place we visit."

"I already did, yesterday. All there is is grass, grass, more grass, and some trees," Bonnie continued, waving her arms towards the small forest to their left for added emphasis.

"Normally it hasn't taken us more than a day to go from one town to another," Clemont observed. "And I believe the longer distance is taking a toll on Bonnie's patience."

"How about if we stop and take a rest until lunchtime?" Serena suggested. "It should make the long trip until Comet Cave more bearable. Plus, our Pokemon could use the time to stretch their legs."

"Well thought, Serena!" Ash agreed, before pointing forward. "Look, that spot between the edge of the forest and a small lake is perfect to set camp."

Nobody contested the idea, and the group decided to take a rest from all the morning they've spent walking. The Pokemon certainly appreciated being let out after spending most of the previous day inside their respective capture devices.

The moment the Pokemon went out, they either yawned, stretched, happily greeted both each other and their trainers. Greninja, however, the moment he was let out, took a look at the rest of his teammates, and the moment he spotted Colarva, he then fired an Ice Beam towards an empty spot next to them. With great skill, Greninja managed to build a rudimentary shelter made of ice.

"Co! Colarva!" the Snow Mite Pokemon happily cried, as he rushed towards the icy construct. "Coooooooo..." he squealed, enjoying the coldness of the artificial cave.

"Great idea, Greninja!" Ash told his Kalosian starter. "That will help Colarva until he gets used to warmer temperatures."

"Gre," Greninja nodded. Then, all of sudden, Greninja tensed up.
"Ninja?"

"Greninja? Something's wrong?" Ash asked.

Greninja looked upwards, and his trainer followed his eyes. There was something in the sky that was flying towards them. As it came closer, Ash could see it was a Staraptor, with somebody riding on its back. It was a young woman with light green hair dressed in a dark blue and green uniform Ash had already seen before.

"You can relax, Greninja. She's a Tandor Ranger," Ash told the Ninja Pokemon.

The Staraptor landed, and the Ranger quickly hopped off its back.

"Hey there, Ms. Ranger," Clemont greeted her, before awkwardly adding. "Is there any problem we should be aware of?"

"As a matter of fact-" the Ranger began.

"Whoa, you're quite the keeper!" Bonnie said, as she walked towards her. "Will you-WHOA!"

"No," Clemont resoundingly cut her off, snatching her with his Aipom Arm before his sister did have the chance to embarrass him.

"You didn't even let me finish!" Bonnie protested.

"I don't need to! I know what you were going to do!" Clemont replied.

Serena shook her head as she chuckled a little nervously, before she walked towards the Ranger. "You were going to tell us something?"

"I was, yes. My name's Wendy, and as you can see, I'm a Ranger of Tandor. Given that I saw that you're about to set camp here, I should inform you about a series of thefts that had happened around the area," the Ranger told them.

"Thefts?" Ash repeated. This also got Clemont and Bonnie's attention.

"Thefts. Many people who traveled through this area had reported disappearance of some of their belongings, usually after they had set up camp to rest, just like you're doing right now," the Ranger confirmed. "And according to some of our witnesses' reports, the thieves are a group of Pokemon."

"Well, we do have some experience with Pokemon thieves," Bonnie chimed in.

Despite the fact that the young girl didn't look at anybody, some Pokemon, most notably Chespin, shot Minicorn a dirty look. The Foal Pokemon smiled awkwardly at them, while Pancham patted her on the back.

"The strangest part is, they're from species not know to work together, so it's possible that they may be working for a trainer. Though the fact that there doesn't seem to be a clear pattern regarding stolen goods puts this idea in doubt, since they just steal about anything they can carry," Wendy further explained. "Anyway, some Rangers are patrolling this zone in case we catch the thieves, while also warning everybody who travels through this route, just like yourselves, so try to stay sharp."

"Don't worry, we will. Thanks a lot for warning us!" Ash replied.

"Good," Wendy said, as she hopped back onto her Staraptor. "And remember, if you have any information regarding the thieves, please contact any Ranger as soon as possible."

With that final request, the Staraptor flapped its wings, raising a gust of wind as it took off, before shooting into the sky. In no time, Ranger and Pokemon disappeared into the clouds.

Ash then turned around towards the Pokemon, both his and his friends'. "You heard the lady! Keep your eyes open in case you see

those thieves!"

They all nodded and cried in agreement.

After a few moments, both humans and Pokemon found something to do in order to pass the time: Ash and Pikachu trained with Colarva, Dunsparce and Aveden. Chespin, Bunnelby, Pancham, and Dedenne played with Bonnie. Sylveon, Eevee, Elettix and Selkid took a bath on a nearby pond, playing in the water, with Eevee continuing his efforts to woo Sylveon. And lastly, Greninja, Luxray and Braixen watched over them; the former two kept an eye on outside threats, while the latter watched over the younger Pokemon.

As for the two remaining humans, Clemont thought it was a good moment to try to decrypt more of the data he downloaded from the Team Omega base, while Serena was about to start a new project.

"Minicorn, come here for a moment!" Serena called.

The Foal Pokemon quickly got out of the water, shaking the water off her wet body, before getting close to Serena. Serena, surrounded by many fabrics and sewing supplies, took a measurement tape, and used it to take some measurements of Minicorn. After writing them down, she allowed the Foal Pokemon to return to the water.

"Hey Serena, what are you doing?" Serena heard Bonnie ask. The young girl had stopped playing with the Pokemon -who continued to play without her- curiosity piqued by what Serena was working on.

Serena smiled proudly at Bonnie's interest. "I'm glad you asked. Remember the outfits my Pokemon wore when they were doing Showcases?"

"I totally do! Those clothes made your Pokemon even cuter than they are!" Bonnie began to gush. "It's a pity they don't dress Pokemon for contests."

"My thoughts exactly," Serena agreed. "That's why I decided to make something about it."

"Really?" Bonnie asked.

"Unfortunately, unlike Kalos, clothes for Pokemon don't appear to be a thing in Tandor, so I'll have to make the clothes myself," Serena told her. "They will be only used for the Appeal Round, though. They'd end up completely torn apart during a battle."

Bonnie didn't seem to mind that. "Can I help you?"

"If you want, sure," Serena said, smiling at Bonnie's eagerness.

And thus, Bonnie helped Serena making clothes for the latter's Pokemon. Serena did most of the skilled work, while had Bonnie do the easier and less complex tasks.

As Serena and Bonnie worked on the clothes, Ash trained, and Clemont worked on his laptop, both Greninja and Luxray quickly grew tense.

"Gre!/Lux!" both cried in unison, as they looked towards several shrubs, which began to rustle. Everybody, both human and Pokemon, noticed this, and held their breath wondering what was coming to them. Were those Pokemon thieves going to attack them?

"Chy?" a high pitched voice said, as a Chyinmunk emerged from behind the shrubs, looking at the group with curious eyes.

Everybody looked at the newcomer, and let out a sigh of relief. "Oh, it's just a Chyinmunk. I was afraid of something bigger coming."

"It doesn't even look malicious," Clemont observed.

Chyinmunk looked around curiously, in a way that reminded them of the first time they met Aveden when he was a Birbie. And just like Aveden back in the day, Chyinmunk looked at the ball, smiled, and asked something to the Pokemon playing with it, probably if it could

play with them. The other Pokemon happily obliged, and Chyinmunk joined the fun.

"Heh, it just wants to have some fun with the other Pokemon," Ash said, chuckling.

"Maybe Chyinmunk wants to join us later," Bonnie observed. "Like Birbie did."

Despite everybody relaxing and dropping their guard with Chyinmunk, there were two Pokemon who did not: Greninja and Luxray watched the small rodent intently with distrustful eyes. They clearly didn't think that the Chipmunk Pokemon wasn't as nonthreatening and it looked.

"Come on Greninja, I don't think a little Chyinmunk is going to pose any danger," Ash told the Ninja Pokemon.

"Ninja!" Greninja said, as he continued to watch the newcomer alongside Luxray.

Ash merely shrugged, and decided to continue the training with the other Pokemon. Despite thinking that Greninja was a little paranoid, he trusted the Kalosian Pokemon wouldn't do anything unprovoked. So far, all Chyinmunk was doing was having fun playing with a ball. Everybody else also continued doing whatever they were doing before Chyinmunk joined them.

The next fifteen minutes were mostly pleasant and uneventful, as people and Pokemon continued with their activities undisturbed.

"Bonnie, fetch me some golden thread, please," She asked the younger girl, as she pulled out a needle.

"Coming!" Bonnie replied, as she looked for the small case where Serena kept all her thread reels. However, despite looking around, she didn't find it. "Uh... Serena? The thread reels aren't here?"

Serena turned at her, a look on obfuscation on her face. "That can't be right. You've been giving me thread reels when I asked you to." She stated, as she began to look around as well, but the case was nowhere to be seen.

"The sheets of fabric aren't here either!" Bonnie exclaimed. "And they were a few minutes ago!"

"Did we just get robbed?" Serena shouted.

The shout, naturally, drew the attention of everybody else, human and Pokemon, who quickly went to check on her.

"Everybody, look if there's something else that's missing!" Serena urged her male companions.

Ash and Clemont nodded, and quickly went to check their backpacks. They ruffled them for a few seconds, before the expected reactions came.

"Some of my clothes are missing!" Ash shouted.

"Some of my tools and books are missing too!" Clemont said.

"We just got robbed! But... how?" Ash asked, looking around frantically, as if the thief or thieves would be still close. "We had Greninja and Luxray watching for potential thieves!"

"Gre?"

"Lux..."

"Yes, but..." Clemont began. "They were rather fixated on watching that Chynmunk that joined the Pokemon who were playing with the ball..."

Both Pokemon opened their eyes wide in shock once Clemont's implication hit them, as a feeling of shame washed over them.

"Speaking of which," Bonnie chimed in. "Where *is* Chynmunk?"

Everybody looked around, and realized that the Chipmunk Pokemon was nowhere to be seen. The implications of its absence soon became evident.

"Gren!"

"Luxray!"

The shame both Pokemon were feeling for failing to stop the theft quickly faded into both validation over realizing that they were right to trust their instincts and not trust the newcomer, and anger over realizing that Chynmunk had still played them, being an intentional decoy rather a potential thief.

"Even with Greninja and Luxray distracted, how were they able to steal anything with all of us here?" Serena asked, throwing her hands in the air. "Somebody must have seen something!"

"It's not that we didn't have our attention elsewhere. All of us were occupied doing something," Clemont said.

"How are we going to get the stolen stuff back?" Bonnie asked.
"Should we just look for the thieves?"

"Of course! We aren't going to let a bunch of little looters get away with all our things!" Ash energetically said, punching his palm. "Come on Pikachu, let's go!"

"I'll go with you!" Serena offered. "Pancham, Sylveon, with me."

"Guess Bonnie and I will stay here to ensure that the thieves don't come back and steal even more of our belongings," Clemont said, before letting out a sigh.

...

Minutes later, Ash, Serena and the Pokemon they took with them walked through the forest at the edge of their campsite, both humans and Pokemon as alert as they could be, trying to find anything suspicious. They encountered many Pokemon minding their own business, but it was impossible to tell if they were the thieves or not. They also saw several Chynmunk, but Pancham confirmed neither of them was the Chynmunk that had played with him earlier.

"So, Ash," Serena began. "Do you know what are we looking for?"

"I've been thinking about the potential thief. It managed to evade our sight, and they only stole small things that weight very little. So it's probably a small Pokemon, like Chynmunk. Maybe even smaller," Ash explained as he continued to walk with a resolute step.

Serena weighed his words, and couldn't find any flaw in his logic. "That makes sense. So we're looking for a nest or a lair...?"

"Yeah, pretty much," Ash agreed.

"Ash... not to sound pessimist, but the Rangers had been looking for those thieves for quite some time, and they didn't find them," Serena pointed out. "What are our chances to find them?"

"I know this is like trying to find a needle on a haystack, but what's the alternative, letting them get away with stealing our belongings?" Ash replied, his voice carrying a hint of anger, though thankfully not directed at her. "I never ever let anybody, be human or Pokemon, steal from me and get way with it, and I don't plan to start now."

"Pikapi!" Pikachu energetically nodded.

"I see you're not going to give up until we find them," Serena observed. "Well, I admit I don't like the thought of letting whoever took our things to get away with it either."

"Besides, I'm sure those Rangers have other duties to attend and thus don't have enough time to search properly," Ash said, with

Serena wondering how much of that hypothesis would be true, and how much of it was Ash presuming they'd had better luck. Still, the girl chose not to say anything.

They continued walking in silence, looking around for any possible clue. They didn't feel that they were doing much progress, since the forest appeared to never end, and they didn't find any lead, small as it may be.

"You know, I'd suggest splitting in order to cover more ground," Ash said. "But we might get lost if we wander too far away from each other."

"That won't be a problem. We can know where each other is through our Pokegears' GPS function," Serena told him.

"The Pokegear has GPS?" Ash asked, dumbfounded.

"... yes? Unless it's manually disabled, you can use it to track the location of all your contact numbers," Serena told him. "Didn't you know it?"

"No. How did you know about that?" Ash asked.

"It was on the instruction manual. Didn't you read it?" the Kalosian girl asked, hands on her hips.

"Ehhh... it may have slipped my mind, hehe," Ash sheepishly said, scratching his cheek and averting her gaze.

"Pika..." Pikachu shook his head.

After Serena showed him how the GPS radar worked -and to ensure Ash's GPS signal was active- the group split off, Ash and Pikachu going one way and Serena and her Pokemon going the other way.

Trainer and Pokemon wandered around the forest, but they didn't have any luck. The most interesting thing they found was a shallow pond that had a small, insect-like Pokemon that Ash never saw

before, with blue, round bodies with four bulbs at the top of it, four dark blue eyes and six little legs.

"Sponee, the Sponge Bug Pokemon. Bug. They are covered by a bizarre sponge-like material. When dropped, they bounce," the Pokedex droned.

Being alerted by the Pokedex's voice, the Sponee quickly turned towards Ash and Pikachu, and before either could do anything, the group of Bug-type Pokemon quickly scampered off, disappearing behind the shrubbery.

"Huh. Guess they're a shy lot," Ash commented, as he was reminded of the group of Smore that they encountered a few days ago which reacted the same way.

That moment, Pikachu began to sniff in the air.

"Pika! Pika-pi!" Pikachu shouted to draw his trainer's attention.

"Huh? Something wrong, buddy?" Ash asked. Pikachu smelled the air again, and began to move. Ash didn't take long to realize what his Pokemon was doing. "Did you catch the smell of my clothes?"

"Pi!" Pikachu said.

"Well done! Come on Pikachu, lead the way!" Ash said, as he followed his starter. He was about to call Serena to give her the news, but decided to wait a bit to see if they could find their stolen belongings first.

They advanced through the forest, making a lot of twists and turns. Ash realized that, the deeper they penetrated the forest, the less wild Pokemon they saw, until they didn't see anyone. The trainer from Pallet had a bad feeling about that.

"There parts are almost devoid of life," Ash said, looking around with unease. "Does this mean we're getting close to the thieves' lair?"

"Pika," Pikachu agreed, nodding, as he continued to smell the air.

"In that case, let's keep our eyes peeled. I'm sure those thieves don't want people poking their noses on their turf," Ash warned Pikachu.

"Chynx," a voice meowed.

Ash and Pikachu stopped, and saw an Orchynx lying on a low tree branch, her head resting on her paws, looking at them with a curious expression. While one of Ash's first thoughts was that Orchynx could be one of the thieves, she didn't look very threatening. Then again, better not let his guard down.

"Um, hi," Ash cautiously said.

Then, Orchynx got on her feet, and with cat-like agility, hopped from the tree branch, landing in front of Ash, somehow not making any noise.

"Pikaaa..." Pikachu hissed, as sparks jumped from his cheeks.

Orchynx didn't pay Pikachu any mind, and once she reached Ash, she started to rub her body against her legs affectionately.

"Heh, you're quite a loving Pokemon, aren't you?" Ash chuckled, as he crouched began to scratch the Grass and Steel-type Pokemon behind her ear. Orchynx purred in delight.

"Pikapi!" Pikachu protested, tugging the trouser leg of his trainer.

"Oh, right, sorry," Ash said, rising to his feet. "Sorry little guy, but we need to go."

"Or?" Orchynx asked, tilting her head.

"You see, we're trying to find a group of Pokemon thieves. They stole plenty of our stuff, and we want to take it back," the trainer explained.

Upon hearing that, Orchynx perked up, and grew excited. "Or, orchynx! Or!"

"Wait... do you know where those thieves are?" Ash asked, his excitement matching that of the green feline. "Can you lead us to them?"

"Pika-"

"Orchynx!" the Kitten Pokemon said, speaking over Pikachu, before turning around and running.

"Hey, wait a minute!" Ash said, before running after Orchynx. "Not so fast!"

Ash and Pikachu followed Orchynx as the green feline ran through the forest. Thankfully, the Kitten Pokemon stopped whenever Ash and Pikachu lost her, patiently waiting for them to catch up. After almost ten minutes of running, Orchynx finally stopped.

"Are we there yet?" Ash asked, looking around. A sense of unease began to form in his stomach as there was nothing resembling a potential lair or nest in the area. "Orchynx?"

The Kitten Pokemon walked towards a nearby bush with many berries growing on it. She plucked a berry with her mouth, and placed it at Ash's feet, before doing the same with an unamused Pikachu. She then went and ate a berry herself.

"Orchynx... !" Ash groaned, slumping his shoulders. "I said we're looking for thieves, not food!"

"Pikaaaaa!" Pikachu growled at Orchynx again, his cheeks sparking with anger.

Orchynx merely tilted her head, confused at the human and Pokemon's reaction.

"Pikachu, can you track back the smell of my clothes again?" Ash asked.

Pikachu began to smell the air once again, several times while facing different directions, but he was unable to pick it up again.

"Chuuuu..." Pikachu said dejectedly.

Ash crouched behind Pikachu, and patted his head to console him. "It's okay buddy, you did your best."

That moment, Ash's Pokegear began to ring, as Serena's name flashed on the screen. Pressing the "accept call" button, Serena's face appeared on the screen.

"Hey Ash, we've been looking around this area of the forest, but no luck," the Kalosian girl told him. "Did you find anything?"

"We had a lead, but sadly we lost it," Ash told her.

Serena frowned, disappointed. "Such a pity. Then again, this forest is pretty big. Say, shall we return with the others?"

Ash sighed, as he looked towards the direction of the campsite. "Yeah. I think it's better if we regroup for now."

"Alright. See you later," Serena said, ending the call.

...

Ash and Serena returned to the camp, and told Clemont and Bonnie their failure in locating the thieves and recover their stolen belongings. Pikachu could tell Ash was both angry and disappointed, even if he did a good job hiding it. Not only with the thieves, but also with himself for not being able to track them and help their friends when they needed them.

They agreed to pack everything up and continue towards the next Pokemon Center, and rest there, given that staying any longer in this

area risked losing even more things to the thieves. Especially if they also showed up at night. Thus, they recalled all their Pokemon back into their pokeballs, and began to return everything to their backpacks.

Serena walked towards Ash, and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Hey," Serena said.

"Hey," Ash replied.

"You okay?" Serena asked, sounding a little worried.

"Of course not!" Ash snapped, as he angrily shoved a rolled blanket inside his backpack. Remorse didn't take long to make itself known. "Sorry. It's not you I'm angry with." He then stopped putting things on his backpack, his shoulders slumping. "I can't stand the idea of having to leave and let those jerks have our stuff."

"I feel the same. I was planning to do some really cute clothes for my Pokemon, but now I have to wait until we get to the next town or city to buy more materials," Serena explained.

"It's not just that. I felt that I failed you guys," Ash confessed.

Serena tilted her head, before she crossed her arms. "Failed us? How? Come on Ash, it's not your responsibility to keep us safe or anything."

"I'm the most veteran trainer here, so it should be," Ash insisted. "Besides, I felt that we're giving up too soon."

"We can't stay here forever looking for those thieves," Serena replied. "I already told you before: if the Rangers had a hard time finding them, what chances did we have?"

"Pikachu found a lead. We would have found the thieves with all our belongings if it wasn't for that-"

"Orchynx!" a new voice meowed, drawing Ash's attention.

...

"Orchynx!" a new voice meowed, making Pikachu's blood boil.

No way. Did that interloper have the nerve to follow them, after she costed them such a promising lead? Pikachu was going to make sure the dumb feline wasn't welcome there, but much to the mouse's chagrin, Ash and Serena got in the way before he could.

"Hey! What are you doing here?" Ash asked.

"Ash? You know this Orchynx?" Serena asked.

"An Orchynx!? Where?" Bonnie asked, frantically looking around, before she saw the green cat, and rushed towards her.

"Yeah. I followed this Orchynx thinking that she could lead us to the thieves, but all she did was show us some bushes with berries on it," Ash explained. "I guess she thought we were hungry or something."

"Chyyynx..." Orchynx purred, as she rubbed her body against Ash's legs.

Clemont chuckled. "Heh, I think she likes you."

"So it seems. This isn't the first time she's doing this," Ash said, chuckling as well, the cat's affection seemingly soothing his bad mood.

"Aw, no fair! I also want Orchynx to rub against me!" Bonnie pouted.

Upon hearing that, Orchynx stopped rubbing her body against Ash's legs, and playfully pounced Bonnie, knocking the young girl on her rear, before Orchynx started to lick her face.

"Hahaha! Come on Orchynx, stop, that tickles! Hahaha!" Bonnie laughed, as she played with the cat.

Pikachu, meanwhile, crossed his arms, fuming. Ugh, were Ash and his friends so easy to charm by this dumb cat? They were willing to drop whatever they were doing to indulge into her childish whims and give her attention. Some might say that Pikachu was jealous, but no sir, he wasn't! He knew that there was something fishy with that cat!

"Pika..." Pikachu said, realizing that something was indeed wrong. This image, of everybody playing attention to the newcomer... it felt familiar. A feeling of unease washed over the Mouse Pokemon as he turned around, looked at Ash's backpack in the ground, and could see and hear something within it. The thieves. "PIKA! CHUPIKAPI!"

Hearing Pikachu yell, everybody turned around towards the electric rodent, who was urgently pointing at Ash's backpack. All of them saw that there was indeed something inside it. And not just Ash's, but Serena and Clemont's respective backpacks as well.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing!?" Ash yelled, as he stomped towards the backpack.

Having been found, a Chynmunk rocketed out of inside the backpack, thankfully taking nothing with it, as a pair of Sponee emerged from the other two backpacks. The trio of thieves and Orchynx quickly high tailed out of there.

"After them!" Ash shouted.

"That Orchynx! She was keeping us distracted while her friends robbed us blind!" Serena said in realization.

"Like that other Chynmunk did before!" Clemont added.

They chased them through the forest, hoping that the Pokemon thieves would lead them to their hideout. Upon seeing that they were about to get caught, the Sponee changed course, disappearing behind some bushes, while Orchynx and the Chynmunk tried to

climb a tree. Chynmunk proved to be the faster climber, quickly leaving the Grass and Steel-type Pokemon behind.

"They're getting away!" Bonnie shouted.

"Oh no, they won't!" Ash said, pokeball in hand. "Colarva, I choose you! Quick, use String Shot on that Orchynx!"

The capture device released Ash's most recent Pokemon, which, upon landing his eyes on the Orchynx, fired a string of sticky web towards her. The string latched onto her back, and Colarva tried to pull her down, but Orchynx sunk her claws into the tree bark, anchoring herself. Unfortunately for the cat, Pikachu, without waiting for a command, used Quick Attack on her in order to knock her from the tree, causing her to fall to the ground. Once down, Colarva quickly covered her in sticky strings, almost forming a cocoon, leaving her completely immobilized.

"Well done, Colarva!" Ash praised. "You too, Pikachu!"

"Co! Co!" Colarva chirped, happy to be useful.

Ash then glared at the immobilized Orchynx, and so did his friends. The caught cat whimpered in fear. It was time for her to pay.

...

The group looked down at the immobilized cat, who whimpered as if trying to move them or have them show her some mercy. However, neither Ash nor his friends were planning to forgive her until the matter of the thefts was resolved.

"Alright, speak! Tell us where you and your buddies are hiding all our stuff! If you refuse to speak, Dedenne here will make you talk the hard way!"

"Nenene!" Dedenne replied, trying to sound threatening and failing miserably.

"Bonnie... what are you doing?" Clemont asked, a little baffled at his sister's sudden aggression.

"Obviously, the 'good cop, bad cop' routine. Dedenne and I are the bad cops," Bonnie explained. "Don't you remember those police shows we used to watch?"

"And who's supposed to be the good cop? Me?" Clemont asked.

"Well, duh. I mean, no offense big bro, you have a lot of good qualities, but you lack the edge needed to intimidate a suspect," Bonnie explained, crossing her arms.

As Clemont and Bonnie discussed the merits of applying a TV series trope to real life, Ash, arms crossed and brow furrowed, looked at Orchynx. She looked frightened, and was trying to avert their gazes. Even if the fact that her interference cost Ash a promising lead still stung, Ash couldn't help but feel that the fear the Kitten Pokemon was feeling wasn't aimed exclusively at them. There was something fishy going on, and against his better judgement, Ash decided that a hard stance wasn't going to cut it here.

He crouched besides Orchynx, and tried to give her a reassuring look. "Alright Orchynx, don't be afraid. We aren't going to hurt you. All we want is our things back," Ash began. Orchynx looked at Ash intently, as if deciding if he was trustworthy or not.

"Oh look, Ash makes a pretty neat good cop too," Bonnie observed.

The trainer from Kanto ignored her. "You don't like doing this, don't you? Stealing from other people. I can tell that you're uncomfortable doing this. Is somebody else forcing you to do this? A human?"

Orchynx shook her head.

"... a Pokemon?" Ash ventured.

After a few seconds of hesitation, Orchynx nodded.

"I see. Alright, now, I'm going to release you. But you must promise me that you won't try to run away. Deal?"

"Pika!?" Pikachu asked in shock.

"What?" Serena asked, surprised. "Ash, what are you doing?"

"Following a gut instinct," Ash replied.

"Ash, you just told me this Pokemon tricked you once. Are you really sure she can be trusted?" Serena shouted, motioning her arms for added emphasis.

"I know I'm taking a big risk here, but... just trust me, okay? I feel like there's more to this Pokemon than we believe," Ash said. Orchynx tilted her head, while Serena crossed her arms and shoot Ash a disapproving look.

However, Serena quickly deflated. "Alright Ash, you win. Sometimes it does feel like you have a sixth sense when it comes to understanding Pokemon. Let's hope it doesn't fail you now."

"Good," Ash said, before turning back at Orchynx. "What do you say?"

After a few seconds of contemplating her options, Orchynx finally nodded.

"Great," Ash said, smiling. "Pikachu, cut the web with Iron Tail."

While unhappy with his trainer's decision, Pikachu complied. True to Orchynx's word, however, the Kitten Pokemon didn't attempt to escape.

Orchynx then lead the group towards what they hoped would be the lair of the Pokemon thieves. Orchynx walked at a steady but not too fast pace. The Kitten Pokemon knew that the moment her pace was too quick, the humans would take it as a sign of trying to run away, and they would stop her.

They spent about half an hour trekking through the forest. And like it happened before, the more they advanced, the less and less wild Pokemon they saw, and the few they did quickly ran away from the strangers. Ash looked around, and realized that this part of the forest was similar.

"I believe that this is where we met Orchynx the first time," Ash said.

"Pi," Pikachu agreed, as he began to sniff the air, before growing excited. "Chupi, pika!"

"Did you catch the scent of my stolen clothes again?" Ash asked.
"Awesome!"

They continued walking until they reached a wall of clumped trees and shrubbery. There was a small nook between two trees that could be used to cross it. Orchynx then stopped next to said nook.

"So, this is the place?" Ash asked.

"Chynx," the Kitten Pokemon nodded.

"It may be a trap," Bonnie pointed out.

"Fortunately, there's somebody who can tell us if it's safe or not," Clemont said, pulling out a pokeball. "Luxray, go!"

After a flash of light, Clemont's strongest Pokemon appeared in front of them. He looked at his trainer, waiting for orders.

"Luxray, use your x-ray vision to see what's behind those trees," Clemont said.

"Ray!" Luxray nodded, as he directed his gaze to the aforementioned trees. His eyes glowed as his vision pierced through them. He moved his head a little to the sides, as if scanning the entire area for potential threats. After a minute or so, Luxray gave his approval.
"Lux, luxray!"

"Luxray says it's safe," Clemont said.

"Great! Let's go!" Ash said.

Lead by Ash, the group entered the nook between the trees, which led to a clearing in the forest, surrounded by trees and a cliff with a cave on it. There were many Pokemon on the clearing: Chyinmunk, Kinetmunk, Ekans, Pahar, Sponnee... all of them looked on edge at best and downright upset at worst. They quickly took notice of the newcomers.

"Ekans?" one of the Ekans asked, looking at Orchynx.

"Chyin?" A Chyinmunk chirped, looking at Orchynx with disbelief.

"APE!" a new voice yelled.

That moment, all the Pokemon in the clearing shivered in panic, and vacated the area as quickly as they could, leaving the group and Orchynx alone. Orchynx, also trembling in fear, hid behind Ash's legs. And that moment, two Pokemon emerged from the cave: one of them was a Primeape, the other looked like a Baashaun, only that it walked on two legs and had less wool over its body, and longer horns that curved upwards. Ash and Serena quickly scanned the new Pokemon.

" Baaschaf, the Hard Horn Pokemon, and Baashaun's evolution. Dark/Fighting. Now that it is able to stand on two legs, it can use more kicking and punching attacks. Unlike its previous evolution, however, it is rather playful," the Pokedex explained.

"Well, that one doesn't look very playful to me," Bonnie said.

"Ape, ape, prim!" Primeape yelled, glaring daggers at Orchynx, who trembled behind Ash's legs.

"Baa," Baaschaf bleated, crossing its arms smugly.

"Are those the Pokemon who forced you to steal, Orchynx?" Ash asked the frightened Grass and Steel type.

However, before he had the chance to get an answer, a third Pokemon emerged from the cave. It was a feline Pokemon that looked like a Feleng, only much, *much* bigger and bulkier, with a brown furry mane covering its neck. The new Pokemon walked between Primeape and Baaschaf, who remained in place, almost looking like bodyguards, while the giant cat fixed the newcomers a hateful stare.

"FEEEEEL!" it growled.

"Just... what the heck is that?" Ash asked, scanning it with his Pokedex.

"Feliger, the Fat Cat Pokemon, Felunge's evolution and Feleng's final form. Normal. Many trainers are disappointed when Felunge evolves because it gets fat and lazy. It can crush foes under its enormous body mass," the Pokedex drone.

Given its sheer size, they wholeheartedly believed the last part of the Pokedex's description.

"That must be the boss, the other two its minions. The three of them probably force the Pokemon of the area to steal for them," Clemont quickly surmised.

"And they don't appear too happy about us getting in the way of their operations," Serena said, locking eyes with Feliger's hateful glare. She reached for one of her pokeballs. "Sylveon, go!"

When the pokeball touched the ground, it released Serena's first Fairy-type Pokemon in a flash of white light.

"If you can keep the two minions busy, Pikachu and I will deal with the boss," Ash said, before looking at his starter. "What do you say,

buddy? You already defeated a Felunge before. Do you think you can take its evolved form?"

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu energetically nodded.

"GER!" Feliger roared, and at its order, Primeape and Baaschaf dashed forward, both of them preparing a fighting type move, their fists glowing with white light.

"Sylveon, Protect!" Serena ordered.

"Luxray, Swift!" Clemont shouted.

Sylveon got in the way of Primeape's way as she generated an energy shield around her, which successfully blocked Primeape's attack, while Luxray waved his tail, releasing a flurry of golden stars towards Baaschaun, forcing the Hard Horn Pokemon to stop and use his attack to parry the barrage of missiles.

"This is our chance, Pikachu! Thunderbolt on Feliger!" Ash said.

"Pika!" Pikachu jumped into the air towards the Fat Cat Pokemon's direction, as his body crackled with yellow sparks. "CHUUUUUUU!"

"FEEEEEEEL!"

But just as Pikachu released a powerful lightning bolt, Feliger's raised one of its front paws, which was covered in a coat of electricity, and with a quick swipe, swatted the Thunderbolt away.

"Pika?" a confused Pikachu asked, seeing his attack deflected.

"What a powerful Thunder Punch," Ash said in awe.

Feliger didn't waste any time, and charged towards Pikachu, moving deceptively fast despite his large girth. The claws of its front paws were glowing with green energy. Ash immediately recognized the attack.

"Pikachu, watch out, that's Dual Chop!" Ash warned him. "Dodge with Quick Attack!"

Using the attack's speed boost, Pikachu rocketed to the side just as Feliger struck the spot Pikachu was in twice, opening small craters on the ground with each impact. Pikachu then started to run circles around the large feline, before slamming into its side with his whole body. Feliger meowed in pain, as the force of the attack pushed him sideways.

"Feeeeeel..." Feliger hissed, piercing Pikachu with its green eyes. Feliger then charged towards Pikachu, its body surrounded by a fiery white aura with spiraling yellow streaks of light around it, raising a trail of dust as it moved.

"That's Giga Impact! Quickly, dodge it!" Ash ordered.

Pikachu didn't need to be told twice, as he managed to move out of the way in the nick of time, with Feliger smashing against a tree instead. However, the attack carried so much power and momentum, the base of the tree was shattered into splinters, causing the tree to topple.

" *Such power! No wonder that Feliger rules this forest with an iron fist,*" Ash thought, who couldn't help but feel some admiration for the wild Pokemon's raw power, as well as disappointment that it chose to waste such strength like that. "Pikachu, Thunderbolt, now!"

As Giga Impact left Feliger briefly immobile, Pikachu jumped into the air, using once again his most powerful move. This time, Feliger didn't have the chance to deflect it with Thunder Punch, and took the attack in full.

"Feeeeeeeeel!" Feliger meowed in pain.

Ash allowed himself a second to see how his friends were doing. So far, it seemed that, while not dominating the fights, they were slowly

wearing Feliger's minions down. Once they were out of commission, they could help us taking Feliger down.

"Let's press our advantage, Pikachu! Iron Tail!" Ash said, throwing a punch forward.

"Pi!" Pikachu agreed, leaping towards Feliger, as his tail began to glow with a silvery gleam. "Pikaaa... !"

"Liger!"

Then, much to Ash and Pikachu's surprise, Feliger rose on its hind legs, its front claws glowing with a green light once again. He used the first strike of Dual Chop to parry Pikachu's attack, and the second one to deliver a devastating counterattack, which sent Pikachu crashing against the ground with such force, he opened a crater once his body hit the grass.

"Pikachu! Are you okay?" Ash cried in horror, rushing towards his partner. While that attack had made a number on the Mouse Pokemon, Pikachu could still get back on his feet and continue the fight.

"Pika..." Pikachu said.

"Let's make sure you don't take another hit like that. Its strength is downright monstrous," Ash observed, looking at the Fat Cat Pokemon with caution. "Then again, we managed to score quite a few hits. A few more, and it should go down."

However, Feliger wasn't planning to go down anytime soon. Much to Ash and Pikachu's confusion, the Fat Cat Pokemon lied on its belly, and let out a yawn, as if it wanted to take a rest from the battle. Then, a green, wavy aura washed over its body, and all the burn marks and bruises left by the previous attacks vanished.

Ash clenched his teeth. He had seen that attack before: Slack Off. If on top of hitting like a truck, this Feliger could heal itself once it took

enough damage, then this Pokemon was an even more formidable opponent than Ash had anticipated.

Then again, if there was something Ash prided in, was in never giving up, no matter how hard things became.

"If you can heal yourself, then we'll take you down so fast you won't have any chance to recover!" Ash boasted.

"Pika!" Pikachu agreed.

...

As soon as the battle had started, Orchynx found a place from enough distance from the fight, but still close enough to see it.

Then again, why did she want to see the battle? She already knew the result. Maybe Feliger's goons would go down, but Feliger was going to tear those Pokemon and their human masters to shreds. And then, things would go back to the way they always were. It's a pity, she liked that human. He was kind and compassionate, willing to listen to her and treat her with gentleness despite the fact that Orchynx didn't give him any reason to.

Then again... she still held some hope that a miracle might happen the humans might win, and she won't have to steal for her despicable master anymore. But with the way the battle was going, it was unlikely. Unless somebody else helped that Pikachu, Feliger would crush him.

Then, an intrusive thought entered her mind. *"You're here. You can help them."*

But Orchynx pushed that thought away from her head. It was stupid. She was too weak to face Feliger. She saw Feliger crush, sometimes literally, Pokemon much stronger than her. Then again, wasn't risking some pain better than continue living this miserable life? An

opportunity for a new, better life was at hand, and she might regret her indecision in the future.

And she was done living with regrets.

...

"Pikachu, Electro Ball!"

"Pika!" Pikachu said, jumping into the air, forming a sphere of electricity on the tip of his tail, and throwing said ball at Feliger with a mighty swing.

Feliger, however, swatted it away with a Thunder Punch, before charging forward, his front paws glowing with green light, ready for another Dual Chop. Pikachu, however, was able to dodge the attack, which pulverized a nearby boulder.

Despite the uphill battle, Ash wasn't planning on giving up. A second Pokemon out could've helped Pikachu, but Feliger was still a single wild Pokemon no matter how powerful. He trusted Pikachu to be able to deal with him

Ash watched how Feliger charged once again with another Dual Chop. He was about to tell Pikachu to dodge and to prepare a counterattack, but suddenly, out of nowhere, a barrage of green glowing bullets slammed against the Fat Cat Pokemon's face. Feliger shut its eyes, and growling in pain, took a step back.

"Pikachu, use Thunderbolt, now!" Ash quickly ordered.

"Pika... CHUUUUU!" Pikachu channeled a powerful lightning bolt through his little body, hitting Feliger in full, who was unable to deflect it like it did before. That attack alone, however, wouldn't be enough to end the fight, not by a long shot.

"Chynx!"

Then, much to the two Pokemon and the one human's surprise, Orchynx landed next to Pikachu, facing Feliger, her body adopting a battle stance, revealing herself as the source of the Bullet Seed.

"Orchynx..." Ash said.

"Pi?" Pikachu asked.

"FEL!?" Feliger growled at Orchynx, looking at her with hate filled eyes, almost as if questioning how did she dare to challenge it.

The moment the larger feline's gaze fell upon her, Orchynx's legs began to tremble, but the Kitten Pokemon fought the fear she no doubt was feeling and held her position.

"Orchynx? Do you want to fight alongside us?" Ash asked, feeling a little moved.

"O-Or!" Orchynx agreed.

"Alright! In that case, let Pikachu take the brunt of the battle. Try to attack when there's an opening, understood?" Ash said.

Orchynx didn't say anything, just nodded nervously.

And thus Orchynx joined the battle. Pikachu would attack, and when Feliger tried to deflect a move, Orchynx would attack from a distance with Bullet Seed in order to distract it, allowing for Pikachu's attack to land. And when Feliger moved onto the offensive, she would obstruct Feliger in order to give Pikachu an easier time to dodge.

Feliger eventually caught up to this, and rather Pikachu, centered its attention on Orchynx. First, it feigned to use Giga Impact against Pikachu, but when Feliger was about to obstruct the attack with an Energy Ball, Feliger changed course and barreled towards her.

"Chynx!?" the Kitten Pokemon cried, as she was paralyzed by the sheer horror of Feliger's massive body coming towards her, the Energy Ball dying before it could fully form.

"Pikachu, quickly, protect Orchynx!" Ash urged.

Pikachu rushed towards the stunned Orchynx, but he knew he wouldn't arrive in time.

"Pa!"

Not that Pikachu's intervention would be needed, as a red blur dived from the skies towards Orchynx, moving her away from Feliger's path, causing the Fat Cat Pokemon to miss once again and smash against a tree.

"Feee..." it growled in pain and anger, before something it saw caused its blood boil with rage. "Liger!?"

Much to everybody's shock, Orchynx was in the air, being carried by a Pahar. Other Pahar were also flying around her. Ash remembered there were a few of them in the clearing when they first entered.

Then, several Chyinmunk led by a single Kinetmunk emerged beneath the shrubbery, and surrounded Feliger.

"Munk munk!" Kinetmunk chirped, its cheeks sparking with electricity, as it and its smaller brethren fired several Thundershocks at Feliger. The attacks weren't very powerful on their own, but together, they made Feliger flinch.

It didn't end there: an Ekans emerged from underground just below Feliger, wrapped its body around the feline's neck, and sank its fangs onto Feliger's flesh. Feliger cried in pain, as it shook its head violently, trying to get rid of Ekans, until the Snake Pokemon couldn't keep a hold of the larger Pokemon's neck anymore and was launched against the canopy of a tree.

But just as Feliger did that, the Pahar above it bombarded it with multiple Incinerate and Air Slash, while several Sponee that had been hidden among the shrubbery fired a multitude of Water Guns towards the large feline.

Greatly sore and confused from the constant streams of attacks, Feliger's eyes began to water as it watched how all the Pokemon that used to be its minions gathered around Pikachu and Orchynx, which no longer trembled. None of them looked afraid in the slightest, and glared at their former master with eyes full of bottled up anger and resentment.

"Ape... !"

"Baa... !"

As for the last nail in the coffin, Serena's Sylveon and Clemont's Luxray had just defeated its two chief enforcers, which ran away when it was obvious the battle was lost.

And seeing how Feliger was vastly outnumbered and overpowered, he also decided to run away, having enough punishment for a day.

There was a moment of silence as those in the clearing, both human and Pokemon, processed that the long battle had finally come to an end.

"We won!" Ash said, breaking the silence.

All the Pokemon gathered there loudly cheered, happy to finally be free from Feliger and not having to steal from humans for him.

Ash walked towards Orchynx, and crouched besides her. "Did you see that, Orchynx? This victory was thanks to you. You inspired those other Pokemon to rally against that trio of bullies. Now that Feliger and its cronies will think twice before forcing anybody to steal for them."

"Orch..." Orchynx softly meowed.

"Hey, guys!" Bonnie's voice came from within the cave. "There's a lot of stuff here! Those guys must've been using this cave to store all their loot! I'm sure our things must be somewhere around here..."

...

And indeed, all the stolen items were there. After recovering their belongings, the group contacted the Rangers, and told them about what had happened. A couple hours later, the same Ranger from before, Wendy, met with them in order to talk about the clash with the Pokemon thieves.

"First you guys dismantle that Pokemon trafficker cell, and now you deal with that band of Pokemon thieves we Rangers have been trying to locate for weeks," Wendy began, shaking her head. "You're trying really hard to make us look bad, aren't you?"

The group of teens could only chuckle awkwardly in response.

Wendy, however smiled. "Relax, I'm not chiding you or anything. In fact, your help today has been invaluable. Once we deal with that Feliger, this route will be safe to travel once again."

"What do you plan to do with it once you find it?" Bonnie asked, showing a surprising (or unsurprising) amount of worry for the Fat Cat Pokemon.

"We'll take it somewhere else where it can hurt any other Pokemon or human again, and we'll try to reeducate it to be more civil before releasing back into the wild," the Ranger explained. She smiling reassuringly at Bonnie. "Don't worry girl, this is far from the first wayward Pokemon we had to deal with."

"That's good to hear," Clemont said.

"We'll also make sure that everything those Pokemon stole is returned to their rightful owners," Wendy told them, as she walked towards her Staraptor. "Anyway, once again, thanks a lot for what you've done here," Wendy said, as she mounted on her Staraptor. "Until we meet again! Take care!"

As they watched the Ranger disappear among the clouds, the group decided it was time for them to resume their journey as well. However, there was somebody who wanted to meet them again before they could leave.

"Orch!"

They turned around, and saw Orchynx there, sitting in front of them. She was smiling, her body language far more relaxed, and her tail wagging lazily.

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu said as he went to face the Kitten pokemon, and offered her a paw, probably as a sign of respect or gratitude for her help earlier. "Chu?"

Orchynx looked at the paw quizzically, before, giving it a friendly lick.

"Pika..." Pikachu awkwardly said, as he took the paw back.

"Oh, hey Orchynx!" Ash said, smiling back at her. "Did you come here to say goodbye?"

Orchynx then walked towards Ash, and began to rub her body against his legs affectionately. The Kitten pokemon might have done that to cajole Ash before, but now the trainer from Kanto could tell it was a genuine show of endearment.

"That... doesn't look like a goodbye to me, Ash," Serena said, giggling a little.

"So it seems, hehe," Ash agreed. He crouched next to Orchynx, and began to rub her ear. The green cat purred playfully. "So... do you want to come with us, Orchynx? You don't have to be afraid to stay here anymore. That Feliger won't bother you again."

"Or, orchynx!" Orchynx insisted, looking at Ash expectantly.

"In that case..." Ash said, rising to his full height, while pulling out an empty pokeball. "Pokeball, go!"

Ash tossed the capture device at Orchynx, who didn't make any attempt to dodge it. The sphere opened up, and absorbed Orchynx inside, before closing and falling to the grass below. It didn't even shake before dinging, confirming that the Pokemon had been captured. Grinning, Ash picked up Orchynx's pokeball.

"I caught an Orchynx!" Ash cheered, raising the pokeball above his head in a dramatic way.

"Pikapi!" Pikachu cheered alongside his trainer.

After his friends congratulated Ash for his capture, the group decided to continue the journey. They still had a long way to go until they would reach Comet Cave. But they would walk the rest of the trip with a new friend among them.

Author's Note: And Ash catches a Pokemon, yay! With Orchynx, two of Tandor's three starters are accounted for, with only one more to go!

Yeah, not much else to say here. Despite the lower-stakes nature of this chapter, I had a lot of fun writing it, and I hope you guys liked it just as much. Plus, writing scenes from Pokemon's POV is always pretty fun.

Fun fact: despite Staraptor not being in Tandor's Pokedex, there's IS a recurring female Ranger in the game that flies around on a Staraptor (and she even gives you a ride at one point in the game).

Thanks to Fox McCloud, 61394, Viroro-kun, hirowriter and Guest23 for reviewing last chapter. Also special thanks to Viroro-kun for his invaluable help with editing and suggestions for this chapter.

Well, see you next time. In the meantime, don't forget to leave a review with your thoughts on this chapter. Your reviews mean a

lot to me :)

Not-Cats: The Musical

Chapter 16:

Not-Cats: The Musical

Route 4 - Baa Grasslands

After their clash with the Pokemon thieves and Orchynx joining Ash's team, he and his friends continued their trip through the Baa Grasslands, heading towards Comet Cave. Thanks to the favorable weather, they managed to cover a lot of distance, including crossing a bridge that went over the mouth of a river, which signaled the halfway point of the route. As noon approached, they agreed to stop, rest, and then have some food before continuing.

Despite the fact that they had dealt with that Feliger, Greninja and Luxray continued to keep watch over the camp, in order to make sure no more thefts happened. For them, it was much better safe than sorry.

And until that time came, Ash and Serena decided to have a sparring session. Ash decided it was time for Colarva to get a taste of battle, while also start his training on Orchynx so she could catch up as fast as possible with the others. Serena was also using her two most recent captures, Selkid and Minicorn. Clemont, Bonnie, and some of the Pokemon watched the match with interest.

"Now Selkid, Water Pulse!" Serena ordered.

"Sel, sel!" Selkid cried, as she formed an orb of water between her tiny arms, before thrusting them forward, sending the projectile at Colarva.

"Colarva, freeze it with Powder Snow!" Ash called.

"Co, co!" Colarva chirped, as he blew a gust of freezing wind towards the incoming attack, turning Selkid's water orb into a sphere of ice.

"Good! Now Orchynx, push it back with Energy Ball!" Ash continued.

"Orch!" Orchynx opened her mouth, creating a sphere of green and yellow light in front of it, before shooting it towards the sphere of ice.

The Energy Ball smashed against the frozen orb, and like a cue ball impacting against another one, the sphere of ice was then pushed towards Minicorn.

"Good counter, Ash, but that won't be enough to beat us!" Serena confidently said, her voice full of energy. "Micorn, Horn Attack!"

Micorn neighed, as her horn started to glow with a white light, while increasing its size a little. Lowering her head, Minicorn stabbed the incoming sphere of ice with her horn, shattering it into a hundred tiny ice shards that glittered under the strong midday sun.

"That would have made you lose quite a few points if we were in a contest battle," Serena remarked.

"Yeah, it would. Nice counter to my counter," Ash earnestly praised. "You're getting better at thinking on your feet."

"Hehe, thanks," Serena smiled somewhat bashfully. "Guess I have a really good teacher. Though, if you liked that combo, just wait to see this: Selkid, hop onto Minicorn!"

Just like Pancham did before, Selkid jumped onto Minicorn's back, though unlike Pancham, she did it with far less grace.

"Now, Minicorn, charge forward and use Charge Beam! Selkid, Ice Beam!"

As the Foal Pokemon galloped forward, her horn began to glow with an electric yellow light, while Selkid opened her mouth, forming an

orb of freezing energy in front of it. The two Pokemon then fired their attacks, a yellow lighting bolt and a beam of concentrated cold flying towards Colarva and Orchynx.

"Quickly, dodge!" Ash ordered. Both his Pokemon did so, but that didn't stop Serena's Pokemon, who continued to fire their beams of elemental power towards the fleeing Kitten and Snow Mite Pokemon. "Colarva, String Shot towards Minicorn's legs!"

Serena gasped, holding her hands in front of her face. "Minicorn, turn around, quickly! Selkid, hop off of Minicorn!"

But Minicorn's momentum was too high to change course, and Colarva's thread of silk wrapped around the Foal Pokemon's front legs, tying them together, causing Minicorn to trip and fall face-first, just before Selkid managed to jump off her back.

"Minicorn! Are you okay?" Serena worriedly asked.

Fortunately, it seemed that Minicorn wasn't hurt, as the Foal Pokemon was back on her hooves in no time, much to her trainer's relief.

Still, Serena couldn't help but sigh dejectedly. "And that blunder would have costed us some points."

"Hey, at least you had the foresight of having Selkid jump off of Minicorn, or else you would have lost even more points," Ash told her.

"Guess that-"

"Gren!"

"Lux!"

The Ninja and the Gleam Eyes Pokemon tensed up, and looked towards the north, warning them that something was coming from

that direction. Everybody quickly turned around sai direction, and indeed, they saw that something was coming towards them.

"Hey, isn't that...?" Serena began, narrowing her eyes to see the distant figure better.

As the figure approached, they could see it was a young teen with bright red hair with a yellow streak in the middle. So far, there was only one person they knew in the region with such a distinctive hair color.

"It's Theo!" Ash exclaimed.

And indeed, the third kid from Moki Town was coming towards them, taking angry steps, his brow heavily furrowed, clearly being upset over something. It didn't take long for the redheaded kid to notice the gang.

"Oh, hey, it's you guys!" Theo said, his mood brightening a little. "Long time no see!"

"I think we haven't seen each other since we parted ways in Moki Town," Serena said.

"We saw both Vitor and Natalie a couple times since then," Bonnie chimed in. "I wondered if we'd ever run into you."

"Oh you, know, I've been pretty busy! Catching new Pokemon, winning Gym matches, being awesome in general," Theo said, acting all high and mighty.

"Really? That's great!" Ash said, ignoring Theo's tone. "So, how many badges do you have?"

"I'm glad you asked!" Theo said, pulling out his badge case from a pocket, and opening it. There were two badges inside. "Two badges already! Pretty impressive, huh?"

"Oh, so you have the same badges as Ash?" Clemont asked.

"What!? You also have two already!?" Theo asked, almost outraged to hear his accomplishments have been matched. "How is that even possible?"

"Theo, Ash is pretty experienced, so it wasn't too difficult to win two badges since he started out," Serena gently said. "In fact, I'd say that if it wasn't for my contests slowing us down, Ash could have three right now."

"Come on Serena, don't say that. You aren't slowing anybody," Ash reassured her.

"Anyway, where are you going?" Clemont asked. "Judging by your direction, you come from Comet Cave."

Upon hearing the name of the cave, Theo's mood soured once again. "Yeah, that was the plan. But a couple of dumb Rangers didn't let me cross it and forced me to turn back. They say it's 'too dangerous' for me. Bah!"

"Dangerous? Why?" Bonnie asked. Both her and her older friends were dreading another incident like that in Passage Cave.

"Apparently, something happened that caused the Pokemon in the cave to go berserk and attack everybody who sets a foot on the cave," Theo explained. He kicked the grass. "My Pokemon would wipe the floor with all the wild Pokemon in that cave! But since I'm alone, they don't allow me to pass!"

"We were heading towards Comet Cave. Do you want to come with us? I don't think the Rangers would object if you're part of a large group," Ash offered.

Theo looked unamused at the suggestion. "I guess I have no choice but to accept if I want to cross that stupid cave. Though, once we're out, I'm traveling on my own again!"

"Trust me, I don't think anybody is going to be sad to see you go," Bonnie deadpanned.

"Bonnie! That was very rude!" Clemont chastised.

"He was being rude first! Ash offered him the means to cross the cave, and he didn't even thank him!" Bonnie retorted.

"So, so say you caught new Pokemon?" Ash interceded, trying to avert a potential argument with the younger boy. "Can we see them?"

"Of course!" Theo said, clearly happy to have another opportunity to brag, as he picked out four pokeballs. "Marvel your eyes before the awesomeness of my Pokemon! Come out, everyone!"

Theo threw his four pokeballs into the air, which opened up, torrents of light pouring from each of them, before forming into a Pokemon each. There was his starter, Orchynx, as expected. There were also a Fortog and an Owten. The last and fourth Pokemon, though, was something neither of them had seen before.

The Pokemon in question looked like a puppy, with light brown fur, reddish-brown feet, ears and tail, which wagged happily. It had two golden crescent moon shaped parts on its chest, and two more above each of its eyes in place of eyebrows. Ash and Serena took out their Pokedex in order to scan the new Pokemon:

"Lunapup, the Loyal Pokemon. Ground/Fighting. Although small, it is very brave. It won't hesitate to protect weaker Pokémon in danger. They can often be heard howling at the moon." The Pokedex explained.

"It sounds like a really neat Pokemon to have," Serena said, as she and Bonnie crouched around the puppy, with Bonnie petting it.

"What about you guys? Are those your Pokemon?" Theo said, watching the large group of Pokemon around him. "Guess they don't

look too shabby..." Theo began, as his eyes drifted towards Ash's Orchynx. "Wait, you have an Orchynx too? How?"

"Ah, yes. I caught Orchynx only a day ago. It's a long story," Ash began. He didn't feel very comfortable airing Orchynx's dark past without her consent.

"If you caught that Orchynx yesterday, then it can't be stronger than the Orchynx I've been training since I left Moki Town."

"I guess not. But with enough time and effort-"

"I challenge you to a battle!" Theo suddenly shouted, while pointing a finger at Ash's face, startling the Pallet Town trainer. "Your Orchynx versus mine!"

Ash was taken aback by the suddenness of the challenge, especially since he was requested to use a Pokemon he had barely trained due lack of time. Then, again, Ash smirked, being someone unable to say no to a challenge.

"Hey Orchynx, what do you think?" Ash asked. "Do you feel like fighting Theo's own Orchynx?"

"Or, orch!" Orchynx happily nodded.

"If she feels ready to face you, then so do I," Ash stated.

"Good!" Theo said.

They all made room for Ash and Theo to battle. Their respective Orchynx were in front of them, ready to duke it out. Clemont would take the role of referee.

"This will be a one on one fight between Ash and Theo. No time limit. Whoever is able to faint the opposing Pokemon first will be the winner," Clemont explained. "Begin!"

~Ash (Orchynx) VS Theo (Orchynx)~

Impatient as he was, Theo called the first move. "Alright Orchynx, let's begin with Leech Seed!"

"Or!" Theo's Orchynx meowed, as it spat multiple seeds at the opposing Pokemon.

Ash didn't even bother to say anything, and merely watched how his Orchynx batted away the harmful seeds with a swipe of her tail.

Theo's eyes opened wide, as his jaw fell. "What? How did my attack fail?"

"Leech Seed has no effect on Grass-type Pokemon," Serena pointed out, sounding like she was chiding him.

Bonnie snorted. "I thought you'd had learned that by now."

"That attack has never failed before!" Theo protested. "How I was supposed to know that?"

"Well, you certainly do now," Bonnie chuckled.

"Uh, nevermind! That was only a little blunder!" Theo tried to save face. "Orchynx, Magical Leaf!"

Theo's Orchynx's body began to glow with a faint green light, as the Kitten Pokemon summoned multiple razor sharp leaves, which flew towards its enemy counterpart.

"Deflect them with Metal Claw, quickly!" Ash called.

Orchynx's front claws began to glow with a silvery light, and quickly began to deliver a flurry of swipes at the leaves that came at her, shredding them to tiny green bits.

"That failed too!? But... how? Magical Leaf is supposed to be unavoidable!" Theo protested.

"Attacks that can't be avoided can still be parried or deflected," Ash told him. "There's no such thing as an unstoppable attack."

"Oh... , well, you aren't going to be so lucky a third time! Orchynx, Vine Whip!" Theo commanded.

A pair of vegetal whips grew from the sides of Orchynx's body, and shot themselves towards Ash's Orchynx.

"I think it's about time to move onto the offensive, don't you think, Orchynx?" Ash asked, his lips curving into a smirk. "Dodge that Vine Whip and get in closer!"

Orchynx obeyed, gracefully avoiding her counterpart's lashes, before rushing closer towards it.

"Now, Bullet Seed!" Ash said, throwing a punch forward.

Orchynx opened her mouth, and expelled a barrage of seed-like projectiles at the opposing Orchynx, most of them area it squarely in the face, making it wince in pain. The attack wasn't strong, but hitting a sensitive zone made it hurt.

"And now, Metal Claw again!" Ash shouted.

Taking advantage of Theo's Orchynx's predicament, Ash's Orchynx quickly bridged the distance between them, and delivered a pair of quick slashes with claws covered in a silvery aura. Theo's Orchynx meowed in pain as it was pushed backwards by the attack.

"Orchynx!" Theo cried, seeing his starter taking such a hit.

"Follow up with X-Scissor!" Ash said, pressing the advantage.

Ash's Orchynx's claws began to glow with a light green aura this time. She jumped into the air, slashing the air with both paws in opposing diagonal cuts, creating and launching an X-shaped blast towards Theo's Orchynx, who was still getting back on its feet.

"Orchynx, quickly, Dig!" Theo called.

"Orch!" Orchynx obeyed, jumping into the air, spinning like a drill before burrowing underground, avoiding the other Orchynx's attack.

Ash's confident smirk faded a little. He wasn't expecting Theo to have taught any of his Pokemon such an attack. "Orchynx, watch out! It can attack from anywhere!"

Orchynx send the ground beneath her feet tremble a little, before Theo's Orchynx burst from underground just beneath her, slamming its head against her gut, launching her upwards.

"Orchynx!" Ash cried.

"Ha! Take that! Direct hit!" Theo gloated, as he began to thurst punches forward, as if fighting an imaginary opponent. "I taught Orchynx that mostly to deal with Fire-type Pokemon, but Dig is such a good and useful move, it works with almost any opponent!"

"Indeed it is. You had quite the insight teaching your Orchynx Dig," Ash agreed, his smile returning. "But that's not going to be enough to beat us! Orchynx, use Bullet Seed again!"

"Orch, chynx!" Orchynx meowed, as she fired yet another barrage of energy seeds at her counterpart.

Theo smiked cockily. "You're slow to learn, aren't you? Orchynx, Dig again!"

As it did before, the Kitten Pokemon turned into a living drill, and dug underground, avoiding its counterpart's attack.

"Orchynx, quickly, jump and fire Energy Ball to the ground below!"

"What!?" Theo asked in confusion. The redheaded boy watched his opponent's Pokemon jump as it formed a green sphere of energy in front of her mouth. That moment, the spot where Orchynx had been

began to crack, just as Theo's Orchynx's burst from underground.
"Orchynx, wait-!"

Too late. Ash's Orchynx fired the attack, which landed squarely on Theo's Orchynx's face, blasting it back towards the ground, while Ash's Orchynx landed on her feet near him.

"Time to finish this! Orchynx, X-Scissor!" Ash ordered.

Once again, Orchynx's front paws began to glow with a light green aura, as the Kitten Pokemon ran towards her counterpart. She then delivered a pair of diagonal slashes in opposite directions, forming an X-shaped blast that smashed against Theo's Orchynx. The attack sent Theo's starter rolling backwards, before it fell on its back. It didn't make any attempt to get back on its feet

Clemont raised an arm. "Theo's Orchynx can't battle anymore. The winner is Ash!"

"... what?" a dumbfounded Theo asked.

"Yes!" Ash shouted, pumping his fist. "Good job, Orchynx!"

"Pi, pikachu!" Pikachu congratulated the cat on her first victory as well.

"Or, orchynx!" Orchynx happily meowed. She returned to Ash and rubbed her head against his legs affectionately.

Theo angrily recalled his own Orchynx, before he stomped towards Ash.

"This doesn't count! You cheated!" Theo shouted, pointing an accusatory finger at Ash.

"What? I didn't cheat at all!" Ash indignantly replied. "I won fair and square, everybody saw it!"

"Then you're a liar!" Theo said, stomping his foot. "There's no way you could have defeated my Orchynx, which I've been training for weeks, with a Pokemon you just caught!"

"Theo, being a trainer isn't just about how much time you have had a Pokémon with you," Serena interceded. "Like we've told you many, *many* times, Ash's greater experience is more than enough to make up for Orchynx being new to the team."

"Yeah, the way he baited you to use Dig... even I saw what was he doing, and I'm not even a trainer yet!" Bonnie mocked.

"Listen, Theo," Ash began, trying to keep his voice even. "Losing is part of a trainer's journey. There will always be somebody that's better than you for one reason or another. And there's nothing wrong with that. I myself suffered countless defeats, especially when I was a rookie."

Theo looked at Ash, his lips quivering, a glint of anger remaining on his red eyes. He then turned around, clenching his fists.

"And what did you do when you lost?" Theo asked.

Ash smiled gently. "I kept going. I trained harder. I sought other people to help me out. I tried to come up with new strategies. Anything that makes victory more likely. Never give up until the end."

"Failure tends to be the best teacher," Serena interceded. "I'm sure you learned a thing or two about battles from fighting Ash."

"I guess using Dig twice in a row was kind of a dumb move," Theo admitted. "No wonder Ash already had a counter prepared."

"See? That's the spirit!" Ash said.

"Though, next time make sure you fight against a opponent more suited to your skill level," Clemont advised. "It will take some time until you can be a match for somebody like Ash."

"How about you, Serena? You don't look as strong as him. Fight me! I still have three other Pokemon that can battle," Theo challenged her.

Serena's eye twitched a little at the implied insult, but decided to ignore it. "No, thank you. I'm not a Gym Challenger like you or Ash. I'm a coordinator."

"Coordinator? Oh, that's what Vitor is doing, right?" Theo asked, scratching his head. "Though, that doesn't explain why don't you want to fight against me. You were fighting against Ash when I arrived."

"Because Ash knows how to emulate the fighting style of coordinators in order to help me prepare for contests," Serena retorted.

"Also, it helps me learn quite a few tricks from contests that can be useful for gym fights," Ash helpfully added.

Theo huffed and kicked some grass, angry to be unable to wipe out the bitter aftertaste of defeat from his mouth. Of course, the idea that Serena might have been able to trounce him just as badly as Ash never crossed his mind.

"Why don't you train alongside Ash? I'm sure you can learn much more things from him," Serena suggested, before she looked at Ash and added: "If you're okay with it, of course."

"Sure," Ash happily said. "What do you say, Theo?"

The younger boy managed to suppress his ego for enough time to accept Serena's offer. "Alright. Since I'm stuck with you guys for the time being..."

"Great! I already saw what your Orchynx can do. Now show me what your other Pokemon have in their arsenal."

...

"Alright Aveden, one more time!" Ash said.

"Ave!" Aveden chirped affirmatively, as he began to flap his wings, creating a pair of blades of compressed air that slammed against a rock, leaving two small cuts on it.

"Alright Owten, now try it yourself! Air Cutter!" Theo yelled.

When Ash had asked Aveden to help him train Theo's Owten, the Bliss Bird Pokemon quickly agreed. How could he tell him no? Aveden managed to grow so far thanks to Ash and his Pokemon's help, so it was only fair that Aveden helped younger and weaker Pokemon to reach their full potential. Even if they weren't Ash's Pokemon.

Theo's Owten had spirit, but was a little impatient. This caused it to rush its attacks without properly building them up, failing in their execution. Fortunately, Pikachu also realized of this, and was quick to explain what the Observer Pokemon was doing wrong. The next time it tried Air Cutter, it worked better.

"Yes, you did it, Owten!" Theo excitedly cheered.

"It still will need a little more practice until it can master the move and use it without trouble," Ash pointed out. "But with persistence, it will have the move down in no time."

"Now that Owten knows a new move, let's do Fortog Next!" Theo suggested.

"Very well. I think your Fortog could learn a thing or two from my Dunsparce," Ash said. Oh, Aveden didn't envy that poor Fortog in the slightest. Especially that maniac grin Dunsparce had on his face as he looked at the amphibian. "Thanks for your help, Aveden. Take a rest now."

"Den!" Aveden nodded, and flew away, leaving the other Pokemon to their own devices.

Aveden knew what to do now. He'd knew what to do for quite some time. He was eagerly waiting for Ash to relieve him from training duty, but he didn't want to look like he wanted to be elsewhere. He could never do that to his beloved trainer. So he worked alongside Ash, as he tried his best to ignore the enticing song that came from the spot where Serena's Pokemon were training.

Except he didn't need to ignore that song anymore. He was now going to embrace it. Ah, there she was, the source of that beautiful voice, an equally gorgeous Pokemon. Even if they belonged to different worlds, he to the skies and she to the seas, he didn't care about that in the slightest. They belonged together in the world of music.

While Serena was training with Sylveon and Minicorn, Selkid was to herself, singing as usual. How the other Pokemon around her could continue with their work without letting such an angelic voice get the best of them was beyond him. Oh well, if they couldn't appreciate what they had in front of them, it was their problem.

Time to impress the object of his affections with his own, clearly inferior but still not too shabby singing.

And thus, Aveden followed Selkid's voice with his own, the two of them forming a duet, the Bliss Bird Pokemon doing his best to match his singing with the Sea Nymph Pokemon. This seemed to draw the attention of Serena and her Pokemon, who stopped what they were doing in order to listen to their song. Serena smiled and followed the rhythm of the song with head bops.

This filled Aveden with confidence, and started to sing more vigorously, trying to push his voice range as much as he could but careful not to drown Selkid's singing. He didn't want to upstage her after all.

Until it became impossible, mostly because Selkid had stopped singing. It took Aveden a few seconds until he realized he was singing alone. A feeling of awkwardness washed over the blue bird, he stopped singing alone and looked at Selkid, who was glaring at him, her arms crossed.

"Selkid?" Serena asked, looking at her with worried eyes. "Is something wrong? Why did you stop?"

That's something Aveden wanted to know as well. The way Selkid was looking at him, as if his very presence annoyed him, didn't fill him with confidence.

"Sel! Selkid, sel! Kid!" Selkid angrily began.

Aveden gasped. Selkid thought he was just trying to eclipse her? But... weren't his intentions clear?

"Av, ave, den den!" Aveden whistled, tried to explain that he just thought that singing a duet would be something fun.

Selkid's frown, though, didn't disappear. "Kid, selkid sel!"

Aveden gasped. So apparently Selkid didn't sing for "fun", but considered it something serious and important, especially now that her singing was a key part to win contests. And that if he only wanted to sing for fun, to get lost and not bother her.

Tears formed around Aveden's eyes as Selkid's words of rejection tore his heart to shreds. Distraught, the Bliss Bird Pokemon turned around, and flew into the nearby forest.

"Selkid! What did you tell him to make him react like that!?" was the last thing Aveden heard Serena say before leaving.

...

"Ash, Ash!"

Ash was in the middle of training with Theo, as Greninja showed Theo's Fortog his Ice Beam so the Round Toad Pokemon could copy it, when Serena ran towards them, looking rather agitated.

"Serena?" Ash asked. "Something wrong?"

"I'm afraid yes. It's Aveden," Serena told him.

"Aveden?"

The honey blonde then explained to Ash what Aveden tried to do, probably in an attempt to woo Selkid, before the Sea Nymph Pokemon rejected him in a rather brusque fashion, causing the bird to go away, leaving a trail of tears in his wake.

"You better find Aveden. The poor bird looked like he could use some comfort," Serena urged him.

Ash nodded vehemently. "Don't worry, I will. Come on Pikachu!"

"Pika!" Pikachu said, as the rodent climbed Ash's, and took his usual spot on his shoulder.

"Theo, I need to leave for a moment. Will you be okay if you continue to train without me?" Ash asked.

"Of course I will! I'm a trainer too, who do you think I am?" Theo replied, almost insulted.

Ash wouldn't have left such reply unanswered, but now he had more important matters in his mind. Like Aveden.

"Um, Ash," Serena said, clutching her blue ribbon in one hand, and the other hand on her wrist. "I'm sorry. For what Selkid did to Aveden."

"It's okay. Whatever Selkid told Aveden, I'm sure she didn't pick up from you," Ash said, sending Serena a reassuring smile. "Now Pikachu, do you think you can find Aveden by tracking his smell?"

"Pi, pika!" the Mouse Pokemon nodded in affirmation.

"Great. Then let's go!"

"Meanwhile, I'll talk with Selkid so she understand what she did was wrong and she can apologize to Aveden once you bring him back," Serena told Ash.

Ash just nodded, before he and his starter got into the small forest. They started to look around, seeing some of the native Pokemon from time to time, but Ash paid them no mind and the Pokemon replied in kind. After five minutes of walk, Ash and Pikachu finally found Aveden, sadly perching on a low branch, his head hunched over. The Kanto native was relieved that to find his Pokemon relatively soon.

"Hey, Aveden!" Ash asked.

Aveden was snapped out of his funk, and looked at Ash. Cawing happily, the Bliss Bird Pokemon flew towards Ash, who held his arm, allowing Aveden to land on it.

"Hey there, pal. You got us a little worried there, flying away like that," Ash said, trying not to sound chastising.

"Chupi," Pikachu added, nodding.

"Den..." Aveden cawed sadly, lowering his head, as if asking for forgiveness.

"Hey, it's okay. At the very least, you didn't go too far away. I was afraid I might have to scout this huge forest to look for you, hehe," Ash chuckled, scratching his cheek with his free hand.

"Av, ave!" Aveden cawed energetically, as if saying that he'd never force Ash to do such a thing.

"Though... Serena told me what happened. I'm sorry to hear how Selkid rejected you like that," Ash said, petting the bird on the head.

"Den..."

"Honestly, I wish I knew what to tell you here, but I'm afraid I don't understand much about what you're going on," Ash sheepishly said.

"Pika..." Pikachu groaned lightly, shaking his head.

"Though, if I were to tell you something... I'm sure one day Selkid will see how awesome you are, Aveden," Ash began. "And if that day never comes... somebody else will. I'm sure of that."

Aveden didn't say anything, seemingly accepting Ash's words.

"Pi, pika," Pikachu told Ash.

"You're right. We should probably get back before they get too worried," Ash said, before looking at Aveden. "Are you ready to go back?"

Aveden merely nodded. Ash was about to walk back to the camp, when the Bliss Bird Pokemon's head suddenly perked up, and looked into the forest. Pikachu's ears also twitched, looking towards the same direction as Aveden.

"Guys?" Ash asked, a little worried. "Is there something wrong?"

But all what he met was silence. Or, at least, that was what he heard at first. After a few seconds, Ash was able to pick up a faint voice coming from the forest, almost as if it was singing. It didn't sound like Selkid, though.

"Ave, aveden!" Aveden happily chirped, as he took off and flew towards the direction of the voice.

"Hey, wait! Where are you going?" Ash asked, as he chased his first Tandorian Pokemon.

Fortunately for Ash and Pikachu, Aveden was flying slow enough so they'd be able to keep up with his speed. After a few minutes of

running, they entered a clearing in the forest, and in the middle of said clearing, the source of that voice. Sitting on a tree stump, there was a Pokemon Ash had never seen before. It was small, only a little bigger than Pikachu, with four legs, with the head of a bird but no wings and four legs. Its body was covered in grass-like green feathers. Its black beady eyes were covered in two red wing-shaped marks that flared upwards.

Surrounding the stump were many other Pokemon that Ash already knew, intently listening to the singing. Ash pulled out his Pokedex.

"Chicoatl, the Green Chick Pokemon. Grass. Chicoatl are shy, but can be affectionate. They are said to be related to both dragon and bird Pokémon." The Pokedex explained.

"Related to birds and dragons, yet she's a Grass-type," Ash mused, as he put his Pokedex back on his pocket. "Well, she does look like a bird at the very least."

The trio continued to hear Chicoatl song with interest. While Selkid's songs used to be slow, melodious and solemn, the tune of Chicoatl's song was something much more festive, something that induced somebody to dance to the melody. The Pokemon around Chicoatl weren't dancing, but they were bopping their heads or their bodies at the same rhythm as the song.

"Ave!"

Then, all of sudden, Aveden began to fly in circles above Chicoatl, and much to everybody's surprise, the Bliss Bird pokemon started to sing as well, trying to match Chicoatl's song.

"Chic?" Chicoatl's chirped in surprise, looking upwards towards the source of the new song, interrupting her own. The rest of the Pokemon listening to her also looked towards the interloper.

"Uh oh..." Ash said, worried.

"Pika..." Pikachu tensed up, getting ready to get his Tandorian companion from a potential mess.

But much to both Kanto natives' surprise, Chicoatl continued her song, allowing Aveden to join as well. They continued singing together, trying their best to match each other's tunes. The Pokemon of the clearing not only bobbed their heads and moved their bodies with more enthusiasm, others were downright dancing at the rhythm of the duet.

"Whoa, look at that Pikachu. It seems like Aveden found his singing partner way sooner than we thought," Ash said, smiling at the spectacle before him.

"Pikapi," Pikachu nodded.

"Oh, the others must see this!" Ash said, as he opened up the Pokegear on his wrist. "I'm going to send a message to Serena telling her and the others to come here. They're going to love it!"

...

After Serena's reprimand, Selkid was understandably in a bad mood. So, that annoying bird comes, disrupts her singing practice to play games, but she's the bad guy here because she told him to shove it? The nerve!

The worst part was the thought of making Serena upset. After everything the trainer had done for her, Selkid felt like she was repaying her with such an unbecoming behavior. Even if part of her claimed that she had done nothing wrong and that bird just had it coming.

"I thought you had more tact than that," Serena had said, as she looked at her in disappointment, arms crossed. "Once Ash comes back with Aveden, you're going to apologize to him, alright?"

Selkid had no choice but to agree. And it wasn't just Serena looking at her like that, Braixen also shared their trainer's disappointment as well. The Fox Pokemon had added that, if Aveden's presence wasn't welcomed, Selkid could have voiced her thoughts in a more civilized manner. The rest of the team didn't say anything, but tried to keep their distance from Selkid.

They treated her as if she had an aggression problem or something.

That moment, Serena's Pokegear beeped a couple times.

...

"A message from Ash," Serena read the screen, and frowned, a little confused. She began to read aloud: "'Come here quickly, you guys HAVE to see this! It's so amazing!'. Well, Ash seems he had found something interesting during his little trip into the forest."

"Let's go! I want to see what is it!" Bonnie urged, excitedly bouncing up and down.

"Knowing Ash, it's probably some new Pokemon he wants to catch," Clemont guessed.

"If that was the case he would have caught it and then showed it to us," Serena replied. "Come on, let's follow his GPS signal. I'm curious to see what did he find."

"Yeah! If it's an amazing Pokemon, I want to catch it before Ash does!" Theo shouted.

The four humans and all their Pokemon entered the forest -well, not all of them. Being the ones often taking on the task, Luxray and Greninja stayed back in order to watch over the camp- following Ash's tracks. As they got closer to their companion, Selkid started to hear something. It sounded like a song. Were some Pokemon singing?

"Hey, do you guys hear that?" Bonnie asked, perking up her ears.

"Yeah, it sounds like... some Pokemon singing?" Theo asked.

"So it seems," Clemont said. "The closer we get to Ash, the clearer the song is heard."

After a couple more minutes of walking, they finally reached Ash's position, a clearing in the middle of the woods. They found the teen boy there, watching the spectacle in front of him: a multitude of wild Pokemon (and Pikachu) dancing to the tune of a duet between Aveden and a green bird-like Pokemon. Serena quickly scanned it with her Pokedex, which identified her as a Chicaoatl.

"Hey, guys!" Ash said, motioning for them to get closer. "Take a look! This isn't something you see every day, huh?"

While Theo didn't look that impressed, Serena and Clemont nodded and smiled. Bonnie and Dedenne even joined the dancing wild Pokemon, wanting to take part in their fun. Serena noticed Aveden singing and dancing with Chicaoatl, who looked like he was having the time of his life.

"Look at that. It seems Aveden found a new singing partner after Selkid rejected him," Serena pointed out.

"Yeah. They make a good couple, don't they?" Ash replied.

Soon, most of their Pokemon -and even some of Theo's- joined Bonnie's example and joined the impromptu dance party.

...

Not every Pokemon had joined the dance party: one of them was Selkid, who was watching the scene in front of her with her arms crossed, as a whirlwind of emotions stirred within her.

So, this was what it took for that bird to move on? Really? Did she really mean that little to him? Sure, she had rejected him, but come

on! She was expecting to dwell a little on the rejection, or even insist a little further. Though, it's not that she wanted Aveden to do so or anything, no sir!

And she definitely wasn't jealous over how that Chicoatl managed to get her claws on him. Or how she definitely didn't regret not giving Aveden a chance before writing him off. If anything, she should be happy that the bird had found somebody else who wanted to pay him attention.

"Parce," a voice said.

Selkid groaned and rolled her eyes. "Sel, selkid!" she wasn't in the mood to deal with Dunsparce right now.

"Dun, dunsparce," the Land Snake said. Yeah, like hell she was going to believe that he wasn't up to something.

"Selkid!" she shouted, trying to shoo him away, but the yellow Pokemon didn't bulge.

"Dun, parce dun," Dunsparce amicably said.

"Selkid," the Sea Nymph Pokemon nodded. Well, of course Selkid was much better singer than that forest hussy. Her species were known for their heavenly voices after all. At least the malevolent worm had some taste.

"Dunsparce," he pointed out.

"Sel!?" Selkid replied in shock. So what if no one ever broke into dance upon hearing her singing? It's not like she sung for them to dance!

"Dun, dunsparce, parce," he suggested.

Show Chicoatl who was better singer? Hmmm... that didn't sound like a half bad idea. Yeah, it was about time to show everybody who was the best singer!

As Selkid walked towards the stump where Chicoatl and Aveden were, she missed Dunsparce's evil grin, unaware that the Land Snake Pokemon had played her like a fiddle.

...

As Dunsparce manipulated Selkid in order to create drama for his own amusement, Ash and Serena continued to watch the spectacle in front of them, smiling happily as they enjoyed the festive mood of the place, even if they didn't directly partake on it.

"You know, if Selkid was okay with singing with Aveden, maybe we could have these kind of dance parties with our Pokemon," Ash commented.

"I know, right? However, Selkid seems to be more of a solo singer. And outside of contests, she doesn't seem to like to sing for an audience," Serena pointed out, thinking how Selkid always tended to keep some distance from the others when she practices her singing.

"Guess it can't be helped," Ash said, shrugging.

Realizing of something, Serena looked at Ash, raising an eyebrow. "Though, coming from you, that's a little surprising. You aren't that much into dancing, are you? I'd thought you'd prefer to spend the time with your Pokemon training."

"I'm not very good at dancing, I give you that," Ash sheepishly said, and chuckled. "Though I wasn't saying it for me. I mean, look at the Pokemon, how happy they look and how much fun they're having. Little parties like this would do wonders helping them unwind and relax."

Then, Serena saw it. Chicoatl and Aveden had created a really good chance for a moment with Ash that could be both fun and intimate. She took a deep breath.

"You know, Ash," Serena said, unable to hold Ash's gaze, as she began to play with her hair, her cheeks turning pink. "You know... dancing isn't something Pokemon alone enjoy..."

"Oh...?" Ash dumbly asked, as he looked at Serena with mild curiosity.

"Yeah..." she rubbed her arm. "Maybe would you like to dance with-"

"Hey, what's Selkid's doing?" Clemont's voice interrupted Serena.

Both Ash and Serena followed Clemont's gaze and saw that Selkid was stomping towards the singing Aveden and Chicoatl. Serena's frustration over being interrupted quickly faded into worry over what the Sea Nymph Pokemon was going to do.

"Selkid..." she whispered, hands over her mouth.

The moment Selkid got close enough to the two singing birds, who hadn't noticed her presence, the Water and Fairy-type Pokemon cleared her throat and began singing, raising her voice so it could be heard above Aveden and Chicoatl's. It wasn't the slow, melodious serenade she often favored, but something similar to what the two birds were singing, something more festive and fitting for quick dancing, but different enough to deliberately disrupt the duo's singing.

At first, Aveden and Chicoatl were surprised into silence, and the Pokemon in the clearing stopped dancing, watching the singing Selkid, some confused, other curious, and everything in between. Still, some of the Pokemon there quickly grew to like Selkid's song, and resumed their happy dancing as if nothing happened.

And, seeing it as an invitation, Aveden left Chicoatl and joined Selkid's side, singing alongside her. This time, though, Selkid welcomed the Bliss Bird Pokemon's attempts at forming a duet, smiling victoriously while shooting the Grass-type Pokemon a smug look. Soon, the dance party resumed as if nothing happened.

"Chico? Chi, chico!"

The Green Chick Pokemon met Selkid's look with a fierce gaze of her own, and would have pouted if she had the facial features. However, as Selkid was about to find out, Chicoatl wasn't going to let this marine interloper steal her thunder in a such blatant way.

So she took a deep breath, and Chicoatl resumed her singing, raising the volume of her voice so it could be hear once again above that of Selkid and Aveden's. And once again, everybody stopped dancing, and Aveden stopped singing.

Selkid, however, not only didn't she stop singing, but sang even louder, not to let Chicoatl outdo her. And in turn, Chicoatl sang even louder.

As the two divas tried to out-sing the other, the Pokemon on the clearing became confused, then a little uncomfortable with Selkid and Chicoatl angrily singing at each other. The mood being no longer one of festivity, the wild Pokemon slowly dispersed, leaving the clearing until there was nobody but the humans, their Pokemon, and Selkid and Chicoatl, which their singing was more akin to yelling at that point.

"Uh, guys? Shouldn't you do something about that?" an annoyed Theo asked, covering his ears to shield his eardrums from the high pitched yelling that resonated through the forest.

"Pikapi!" Pikachu agreed, though he was barely heard.

"Selkid and Chicoatl might strain their throat if they keep up like this," a worried Ash contributed.

"I... I think they have a point," Serena said, a bit unsure on how Selkid would react to being told to drop it. "Um, Selk-"

However, before Serena could say or do anything, Selkid fell victim to a coughing fit, interrupting her singing.

"Selkid!" Serena cried, kneeling besides her Pokemon and patting her back. "Selkid! Are you okay?"

"Chi! Chicoatl!" Chicoatl cried in triumph, seemingly declaring her victory over their little duel.

Selkid gasped in shock. Then, upon realizing that she had lost, she puffed her cheeks angrily as she fixed Chicoatl with the most hateful glare she could muster.

"Sooooooooeeel... !" the Sea Nymph Pokemon seethed.

"Now Selkid, calm down. This doesn't mean that-" Serena tried to argue.

"SELKID!" Selkid shouted, and launched a Water Pulse into Chicoatl's face.

The attack hit the surprised Green Chick Pokemon in the face, knocking her on her back. The action drew a collective gasp from everybody watching.

"Selkid!" Serena shouted.

Chicoatl got back on her feet and looked at Selkid as tears gathered on her eyes, before the Grass-type Pokemon ran away, crying, disappearing behind the shrubbery.

"Selkid! That was completely uncalled for!" Serena angrily chastised.

"Sel!" Selkid huffed, and crossed her arms.

"First you're so rude with Aveden, and now this!" Serena said, throwing her arms into the air. "Just what's wrong with you today!?"

"Selkid?" she asked, almost surprised at how angry Serena was at her.

"Is singing such a big deal to you that you get mad when other Pokemon do it? Do you feel like they're overshadowing you or something?" Serena continued.

"S-Sel..." Selkid replied, unfolding her arms, her posture slumping a little. Serena's reprimand was quickly chipping away her bravado and anger. Her trainer could tell that Selkid was starting to feel bad, though if it was because she understood the weight of her actions, or because she didn't want to disappoint Serena, she couldn't tell.

Not that it mattered that much. Serea sighed, and tried to calm herself down, before kneeling before Selkid, and placing a hand on her shoulder.

"Selkid, I know that singing is very important to you. But there are others, both people and Pokemon, who see it another way. A way to have fun, or a way to connect with others. And that's okay," she began. "Neither Aveden nor Chicoatl trying to outdo you or humiliate you or anything like that. Do you understand that?" she asked.

"Kid..." Selkid nodded.

"Then you'll also understand that the way you reacted to the two of them was wrong, and you ended up hurting them," Serena continued.

Once again, Selkid nodded.

"So now it's up to you to fix this mess," Serena said, standing to her full height, towering over the small Water-type. "And the first thing you must do is apologize to Aveden, don't you think?"

Selkid weakly nodded, and walked towards the Bliss Bird Pokemon, standing on the ground next to ass. "Sel, kid, selkid, sel."

"Aveden! Ave!" Aveden happily chirped back. Thankfully, it seemed that Aveden wasn't somebody to hold a grudge.

"Good. Now, we need to find that Chicoatl so Selkid can apologize to her," Serena said.

"Good luck with that. Who knows where Chicoatl is now," Bonnie said, looking around. "This forest is pretty big."

"Leave that to me!" Theo interjected. He waved a hand at his Lunapup. "Lunapup have a really great sense of smell, so I'm sure mine will be able to track that Chicoatl."

"Arf, arf!" Lunapup happily barked in agreement.

"Come on buddy, find that Chicoatl!" Theo told him.

The group returned all of their Pokemon to their pokeballs minus Selkid. Lunapup began to sniff the air, and in no time, he managed to find Chicoatl's track. It seemed that the Green Chick Pokemon didn't go too far away, since they only took a few minutes of walking until Lunapup found her, lying at the edge of a small pond. After thanking his Pokemon for a job well done, he returned Lunapup to his pokeball.

Serena dug into her pocket, pulled a macaron, and handed it to Selkid.

"Here, give this to Chicoatl as a peace offering. Hopefully it'll make her more open to listen to you," Serena instructed the Water and Fairy-type, who nodded.

While the rest of the group stayed behind, the two of them walked slowly towards Chicoatl, who still hadn't noticed their presence. That's it, until Serena cleared her throat, alerting the Green Chick Pokemon, who quickly jumped to her feet and turned around, shocked to see the humans and Selkid back. This time, though, she appeared to be ready to fight back if necessary. Both trainer and Pokemon froze on the spot.

"Chi, chico!"

Serena raised her hands defensively. "Please, calm down. We didn't come here to fight you. I know that what Selkid did to you was awful, but she has something to tell you. Will you listen to her?"

Chicoatl narrowed her black beady eyes at the Water-type Pokemon, clearly not trusting her. Unlike before, Selkid was unable to hold the Green Chick Pokemon's fierce gaze. Eventually, Chicoatl nodded.

"Coa."

"Come on Selkid," Serena encouraged her.

Selkid closed the remaining gap, and mustered enough courage to look at Chicoatl in the eye.

"Sel, selkid, kid, sel," Selkid began, sounding sincere.

"Chi..." Chicoatl said, her body still tense.

"Sel?" Selkid asked, offering the macaroon.

Chicoatl looked at the piece of food suspiciously. She sniffed it a little, before her eyes grew wide. She tentatively bit a small piece with her beak, and tasted it.

"Chico...?" she asked, as her taste buds enjoyed the flavor. "Chico, chicoatl!"

Chicoatl opened her beak wide, snatched the macaroon from Selkid's hands, and basically swallowed it in one go.

"Chi, chico, coatl!" Chicoatl happily chirped. Judging by her reaction, that macaron was the tastiest treat the Green Chick Pokemon had ever savored.

"So, everything's all right?" Serena asked, hoping the macaron was enough to placate the wild Pokemon. "As Selkid's trainer, I once again apologize for her behavior. I hope you liked that macaron."

"Chi, chico!" Chicoatl agreed.

"You have an amazing voice, Chicoatl. Keep singing and bringing joy and smiles to the Pokemon in this forest," Serena said.

"Chi?" she asked, titling her head.

"Well, I think we're done here," Serena turned at Selkid. "I sincerely hope this doesn't happen again, Selkid."

"Sel..." Selkid shook her head.

"Good. Return," Serena recalled the Water and Fairy-type back to her pokeball, before walking back towards the boys and Bonnie.

"Alright, we're done here. Shall we return to the camp?"

...

After making peace with Chicoatl, the group returned to their camp, where they trained and played with their Pokemon before it was time to have lunch. After that, they packed their things, and continued their journey towards Comet Cave.

And after a couple hours of walking, the group finally saw a small mountain rising in the horizon.

"There it is! Comet Cave!" Theo excitedly said, as he began to run towards the mountain. "This time those Rangers won't be able to stop me from crossing it!"

"What are we waiting for? Come on!" Ash said, running after Theo, and quickly catching up to him.

"Theo, calm down! It's not that the cave is going anywhere!" Clemont said, as he and the two girls looked the two excitable trainers rush forward. "Why is that everybody likes to run so much?"

Serena giggled a little. "I guess it's in their nature."

And thus, the group, as well as Theo, prepared to cross a cave for the second time since they arrived to the Tandor region.

"Chico!"

And unbeknownst to all of them, a certain green, four legged bird Pokemon who had been following them for the past few hours would cross that cave as well.

Author's Note: It's been a while since the last time we saw Theo, didn't it? And I believed that this was a good place for him to finally make an appearance after his debut (and if you played Uranium, you'll understand why).

The plot of this chapter was quite the challenge, given that it came after the heels of a chapter that had a pretty standard plot of rogue Pokemon causing trouble for the group. So here I had to wrack my brain in order to come up with something different, such as being one of the group's Pokemon who starts the trouble, and the main conflict being something that can't be solved with violence. Hope you liked the end result.

Many of you said you liked scenes from Pokemon's point of view, so I hope you enjoyed those from this chapter as well.

If you're interested in what the Pokemon were singing:

Selkid's Song: Melodies of Life (from Final Fantasy IX)

Avden's Song: Hopes and Dreams (from Undertale)

Chicoatl's Song: Saria's Song (from The Legend of Zelda: Ocarine of Time)

Thanks to Viroro-kun, 61394, cricketlaxwolvesbandy, Fox McCloud, DryBonesKing and hirowriter for reviewing last

chapter. And many thanks to Viroro-kun for his help on this chapter, whose edits and suggestions made it so much better.

And as usual, don't forget to leave a review while you wait for the next chapters. Your reviews is what keeps me going :)

Meeting Dragons

Author's Note: This fic has now 100 reviews! Shout out to Viroro-kun for writing the review #100!

Chapter 17:

Meeting Dragons

Route 4 - Baa Grasslands

Seeing Comet Cave filled the group with ambivalent feelings: on one side, after the long trek through Baa Grasslands, they were happy to finally leave the route behind, not only for change of scenery, but because the long route made them feel they weren't making any progress, and a new location washed such feeling away.

But on the other hand, the memory of Passage Cave was still recent in their minds, and they didn't feel like going through that experience again. And no, Davern's words didn't make them any confident that this cave would be any better. The fact that Theo had been banned from entering the cave alone, plus the Ranger they could see watching the entrance didn't inspire them any confidence.

As they got closer, Serena pulled out her tablet, and looked what the net had to say about Comet Cave, not wanting any nasty surprises. She frowned a little when she saw that most of the Pokemon that inhabited Comet Cave were almost the same they also lived in Passage Cave -though she was forced to concede that it was logical-, but her expression perked up when she reached the section that talked about the cave's points of interest.

"Hey, hear this out, guys," Serena said, reading aloud. "Despite the lack of unique Pokemon, Comet Cave is a popular spot among both trainers and researchers, given its large quantity of fossils of

prehistoric Pokemon hidden beneath its walls and ground. It's also one of Tandor's many places where Mega Stones can be found."

"Mega Stones and fossils? That's great!" Ash said, pumping his fists. "With some luck, we might find some in our way!"

"It would be cool if we did. Though, it's not that we aren't going to get any mileage out a Mega Stone, given that none of us has Keystones," Clemont pointed out.

"Hm, that's a problem," Ash said, placing a finger under his chin. "But given how many people in Tandor use Mega Evolution, they must getting them from somewhere, right?"

"Theo, given that you're from here, do you know where one can get a Keystone?" Clemont asked the redhead.

Theo mimicked Ash's expression as he tried to recall such information. "I think I heard the old man saying something about a Mega Evolution Master on East Tandor... maybe from him?"

"The old man?" Bonnie repeated.

"Professor Bamb'o," Theo specified.

"Is he even that old?" Serena asked. "The guy said he just finished his thesis! He can't be older than thirty five."

"Then how is that he guy never seem to get my name right, huh? Old or young, the guy's senile!" Theo hotly countered.

Before the argument on Bamb'o's mental health could develop any further, the group finally arrived to the cave's entrance, and a Ranger guarding it. Said Ranger was a broad shouldered man with curly red hair, and a thick moustache of the same color. Next to him was an Aggron. The Ranger smirked upon seeing the group, his brown eyes fixed on Theo.

"So, you're back, laddie? Hehe," the Ranger laughed. "You bring some pals with you now, I see."

"Yeah! So you can't stop me from passing!" Theo said, almost gloating.

"Hey, don't get mad at me, kiddie. I don't make the rules, only enforce them," the Ranger said, shrugging. "You may be a large group, but you better be careful in there."

"Is it that bad?" Clemont asked. "I mean, to ban people from crossing the cave alone..."

"There has been some seismic disturbances recently. As you can imagine, the Pokemon inside aren't exactly calm and relaxed," the Ranger began to explain. "It's better to have a travel buddy so you can help each other in hairy situations. And if something awful happen to one of you, the others can tell us so we can mount a rescue."

Serena nodded with a hum. "Guess it makes sense."

"My advice would be to get to the other side as soon as possible. If you're like those people coming here to find Mega Stones or something like that, better come sometime later, when things calm down," the Ranger warned them.

With that, the group entered the cave.

...

If there was one thing that Comet Cave was better than Passage Cave on, it was its size. While the latter had several chambers connected by narrow tunnels that made navigating the cave a bit of a hassle, the former and current cave was much more spacious.

There were also many fluorescent teal-colored crystal formations growing across the walls and the ground, providing a dim but

nonetheless useful illumination, which would make crossing that cave all the easier.

"Whoa, look at those glowing crystals!" Bonnie ran to see the crystals better. Her eyes were twinkling with the light. "So pretty!"

"Bonnie, don't get away from us!" Clemont shouted. "Remember what the Ranger said! Let's stay together!"

"Yeah, better stick together. We don't want anybody to stray away from the group," Serena added.

"Come on guys, don't be such a stick in the mud. You can still see me, right?" Bonnie replied, as she continued to admire the crystal.

"Can't you just take a picture or something?" Theo impatiently asked. "Come on, I want to get out of this cave as soon as possible!"

Huffing a little, Bonnie returned to the group, and they continued their march across the cave. Just like their trip through Passage Cave, all they needed to do was move north, and they'll find an exit that would lead them to Route 5. Even if the cave branched into many paths across the middle, in the end all those paths converged on that same exit, so there was no danger of getting lost. Apparently, the only danger came from the wild Pokemon living in the cave.

For some time, they walked in silence, which was broken only by the sounds of water drops falling from the stalactites, as well as the current from small underground rivers that crossed the cave. Strangely enough, they didn't see nor hear any Pokemon.

Eventually, the group arrived at a large chamber, with several tunnel exits. Also, aside from the teal crystals, amethyst-colored glowing crystals dotted the ground as well.

"Whoa, there are even more colors here!" Bonnie almost squealed as she went to check the new crystals.

"So, which one should we take?" Ash asked, looking at the different tunnel exits.

"We have no way of knowing which one will lead to the exit the fastest, so we'll have to pick one at random and hope we chose right," Clemont said, a little discouraged. "I think I'll have to work on something to help us navigate a cave."

"Yeah, no. It will explode as usual and cause an avalanche," Bonnie deadpanned, as she continued to admire the magenta glowing crystal. As she continued gazing into it, she noticed that the rock the crystal was growing from had some strange hole inside it. Moved by curiosity, Bonnie was about to poke the hole with her finger, when all of sudden, a pink eye opened inside the hole. "AHH!" Bonnie yelped, falling on her butt.

"Bonnie?" Clemont asked. "What's wrong?"

Then, as Bonnie crawled back to the group, the alleged rock grew four tiny rock legs, which it used to completely unbury itself from the ground.

"Com, comite!" the rock said, its voice sounding like a deep buzz.

"Wait is that... a Pokemon?" Ash asked, as he, Serena and Theo pulled their Pokedex and scanned the rock-like Pokemon.

" *Comite, the Meteorite Pokemon. Rock. It can retract its legs into its body and appear to be an ordinary rock. Stories say they arrived on an asteroid.*" The Pokedex explained.

"So you tell me that now," Bonnie deadpanned, looking annoyed at the Pokedex.

"That's so cool! I think that Pokemon can make a great addition to my team!" Theo said, as he unclipped a pokeball from his belt. "The Pokedex said it was a Rock-type, right? Then Lunapup will make short work of it! Come on buddy!"

"Theo, wait-" Ash tried to warn Theo, but the younger boy already threw the pokeball forward, releasing the Ground and Fighting-type puppy.

"Lunapup, Brick Break!" Theo ordered.

"Arf, arf!" Lunapup happily barked, as he charged towards the Comite, and delivered a vertical chop with a white glowing paw that send the Rock-type Pokemon stumbling backwards.

"Yes! Direct hit!" Theo cheered.

"Com, com, comiiiiiiiite!" Comite buzzed, almost sounding like a cry of pain.

"Cry all you want, nothing will stop me from catching you!" Theo said, throwing a punch for added emphasis. "Lunapup, follow up with Bulldoze!"

Lunapup was about to follow his trainer's command, when he was distracted by a rumbling noise coming from many directions. Looking around, everybody saw how the dozens of rocks the magenta-colored crystals were growing from began to shake as if they were alive, before each also sprouted four tiny legs, and turned around in order to gaze the intruders with their single eye.

"Com!"

"Comite!"

"Mit!"

The Comite's angry buzzing caused Theo's bravado and excitement to instantly vanish, his face losing a good chunk of color upon realizing how vastly outnumbered he was.

"That's what I was trying to warn you about! Pokemon living in caves tend to form large groups! If you attack one, more will come to their aid!" Ash hotly explained.

"See? This is why you always need to be more careful!" Serena added.

"Com, comite, mit!" the Comites began to buzz angrily as they closed in on the group. Theo fearfully took a step back, while Lunapup growled at them, while standing protectively in front of Theo.

"You... you guys are going to help me deal with them, are you?" Theo asked, knowing that not even using all his pokemon at once would be enough to match the enemy's numbers.

"We were going to help you, just stay calm," Serena grumbled, a pokeball already in hand. "Pancham, go!"

"Eletux, go!"

"Orchynx, I choose you!"

"Pika!" Pikachu jumped onto the ground, ready for battle even if Ash didn't tell him to.

As the capture devices released flashes of white light, soon Lunapup was joined by two of the three Tandor starters, as well as the small Kalosian fighting-type.

The Comite began the attack, unsurprisingly with a bunch of Rock-type moves, most of them being basic Rock Throws, though Ash could see an Ancient Power there. Pikachu and Pancham leaped forward, breaking the coming stones with a powerful Iron Tail and Arm Thurst, respectively, shattering the incoming projectiles.

They followed with more varied and unexpected attacks coming from cave dwelling Rock-types, such as Charge Beam, Shadow Ball, Psybeam and Signal Beam, a combination that no single move would be allowed to counter. No single move bar one.

"Sylveon, use Protect!" Serena said just as she threw a pokeball forward, releasing her second captured Pokemon.

The moment Sylveon materialized on the ground, her eyes glowed with a faint white light as she generated a green semicircular green barrier around both herself and her friends. The incoming attacks crashed against the sudden barrier, causing Sylveon to wince, but the barrier held long enough to stop said attacks.

Ash couldn't help but feel a little surprised by these Pokemon's arsenal: in Ash's experience, cave dwelling Rock-types like Geodude, Aron, Roggenrola, and Tandor's own Barel often favored physical moves, usually of one or two types, at least those in the wild. But these Comite were far more versatile than the average cave dweller Rock-type. Maybe Theo had the right idea in wanting to catch one.

Though, right now, he should focus on beating them rather than catching one.

"Time to counterattack! Orchynx, use Energy Ball! Pikachu, Thunderbolt!" Ash commanded.

"Eletux, Water gun!" Clemont joined in.

The combination of powerful yellow lightning bolt, a green sphere of plant-like energy and a powerful stream of water crashed against multiple Comite gathered in front of them, resulting in a multi-elemental explosion that sent them flying in multiple directions.

Seeing Ash and his friends in action, Theo recovered some of his lost bravery. Or maybe it was his pride warning him about the potential shame of freezing with shock when everybody else was able to fight.

"Our turn, Lunapup! Use Earth Power!" Theo said.

"Arf!" Lunapup jumped into the air, his front paws glowing with a golden light, before he landed pawfirst into the ground, releasing an underground shockwave towards the group of Comite. The seismic shockwaves knocked some Comite back, but others began to crackle with electricity, and much to Theo's shock, levitated into the air, avoiding the attack.

"What the... what the heck is THAT!?" Theo protested. "The Pokedex didn't say they could fly!"

"That's Magnet Rise," Clemont identified the move. "An Electric-type move that allows the user a small measure of flight or levitation."

"Are you kidding me!?" Theo asked, thrusting both arms exagerratedly. "There are Pokemon who can do that?"

As Theo wasted time voicing his thoughts, his Lunapup was lifted into the air by a Confusion, and painfully slammed against a stone wall.

"Lunapup!" Theo cried.

"Focus on the battle, Theo!" Serena told him. She then saw another barrage of multiple attacks heading their way. "Sylveon, Protect again!"

"Veon!" Sylveon cried as she once again erected a green curved barrier, blocking most of the attacks. Unfortunately, the second time in a row Protect wasn't as sturdy as before, and the barrier flickered a little before disappearing, allowing the last three attacks to pass and hit the Fairy-type.

"Sylveon!" Serena cried. "Sylveon are you okay?"

The few Comite that had used Magnet Rise took advantage of their new mobility, and circled the humans and their Pokemon pelting them with multiple Rock Throws, Charge Beams and Psybeams,

forcing them to scatter around the chamber. Unfortunately, Bonnie ended up the furthest from everybody else.

"Bonnie!" Clemont cried.

"Don't worry, I'll get her!" Serena offered, being the one closest to her. However, when she tried to run towards her, she almost zapped by a Charge Beam launched by a flying Comite, forcing her to halt. "EEP!"

"We can't fight them on both ground and the air!" Ash said, as he pulled out another pokeball. "Let's even the odds! Aveden, I choose you!"

The pokeball opened, releasing a mass of bluish white light that coalesced into Ash's first Tandorian Pokemon, his wings spread and ready to face the enemy.

"Ave, aveden!" the Bliss Bird Pokemon cawed.

"Aveden, use Mirror Shot against those Comite! Aim for those levitating!" Ash commanded.

"Aveden!" the blue bird cawed, as he opened his beak, forming an orb of silvery light, before said orb exploded into an energy beam of the same color that barreled towards a nearby floating Comite, blasting it backwards. He then fired more beams towards the other Meteorite Pokemon, who did their best to avoid the super effective attack, but weren't used to move through the air as Aveden was.

That got the flying Comite out of their hair, but left those on the ground. And it seemed they didn't want them to reach Bonnie, because the moment Serena continued running towards the younger girl, a trio of groundbound Comite quickly got in her way. Pancham and Sylveon, trailing behind her, prepared to fight them. However, it proved to be unnecessary when said Comite were blown away by a powerful barrage of Razor Leaf, clearing the path.

"Thank you Ash!" Serena said.

"Thank you? Why did you-" Ash was about to ask, when a loud noise came from afar, drowning his voice.

GROOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRR!

Suddenly, the Comite stopped fighting, and froze in shock, causing the Pokemon of Ash and his friends to stop fighting as well. For a few seconds, a deafening silence reigned supreme, before all the Comite suddenly scrambled for the nearest tunnel exit, running as if their lives depended on them.

Which proved to be an accurate statement, because not a second had passed since the Meteorite Pokemon began to run when the entire cave began to violently shake, as large chunks of rock began to fall from the ceiling.

"An earthquake!" Theo yelled.

Serena, Bonnie and their Pokemon tried to rejoin their male friends, but when they tried to get close, a multitude of rock chunks fell from the cave's roof in front of them, blocking their path.

"Serena! Bonnie!" Ash cried, also trying to get close to her, but unable to due the falling rocks.

"This chamber is collapsing! Fall back!" Clemont shouted.

Both groups ran in the opposite direction of the falling boulders. After a few seconds that felt neverending, the quake ceased, and so did the falling rocks. Unfortunately, there was now a large barrier of rocks separating Serena and Bonnie from their male friends.

"Serena! Bonnie!" Ash yelled again, his voice appeared muffled from the other side of the rock wall. "Are you okay?"

Serena looked at Bonnie, who appeared shaken but otherwise unharmed. "Yes, we're okay!"

"What do we do now?" Bonnie asked. "Can you guys remove the rocks?"

"It would take quite a lot of time. Plus, I'm seeing a lot of cracks on the chamber's walls and roof. If we do that, it might collapse completely," Clemont's voice explained.

"Then what are we supposed to do? We can't go back, the tunnel we came from is on your side!" Bonnie protested.

"Is there any other tunnel exit?" Ash asked.

"Just one," Serena replied, looking at the lone way out of her side of her chamber.

"We know all paths lead to the northern exit. You take that one, we'll take another, and we'll eventually meet at the exit. What do you think?" Ash suggested.

"It sounds like the best idea at the moment," Serena agreed. "Alright, we'll see you at the exit."

"Take care of Bonnie, Serena. And Bonnie, stay close to Serena and do everything she says, okay?" Clemont asked.

"Don't worry Clemont! We will be fine!" Bonnie assured him.

"We better start moving. We don't know how long this tunnel can go on," she then turned towards her Pokemon, standing next to her.

"You guys better return to your pokeball and- huh?"

Serena blinked a couple times, upon realizing that there was a Pokemon next to Pancham and Sylveon. A Pokemon that was neither hers nor her traveling partners', but a familiar one nonetheless; a bird-like Pokemon with green grass-like feathers that walked on four legs.

"C-Chicoatl?" Serena asked in shock.

"Chico!" the Green Chick Pokemon happily chirped.

"What are you doing here?" Serena asked, as she returned Pancham and Sylveon to their pokeballs. "Have you been following us?"

"Chi?" Chicoatl asked, tilting her head quizzically.

"Hehe, guess that, despite all the troubles with Selkid, Chicoatl liked us so much she wanted to tag along!" Bonnie happily said. Then, a realization hit the blonde. "Wait, that Razor Leaf from before! It wasn't Ash's Orchynx, but you, right?"

"Chi, chicoatl!" Chicoatl chirped and nodded.

"Guess we should count ourselves lucky that you decided to follow us," Serena said, taking a look at the wild Pokemon. She then looked at the tunnel exit, and a feeling of unease washed over her. "Come on, let's not waste anymore time. It may be wishful thinking, but maybe we'll be able to reach the other end of the cave without further incidents."

Serena walked towards the tunnel exit, followed by Bonnie and Chicoatl.

...

Ash, Clemont and Theo wasted no time and took the closest tunnel exit.

"Alright, let's keep a good pace, and try not to fight any wild Pokemon until we reach the exit," Ash began, taking the lead. "Once we reach it, we'll try to clear the area of obstacles so Serena and Bonnie have an easier time reaching us."

"Who died and made you boss?" an annoyed Theo asked.

He was promptly shut up by Ash and Clemont's very unamused stares.

"Since you're a guest in our group, the least you could do is not being a hindrance for the rest of us," Clemont said, fixing the younger boy with a hard stare. "If you didn't rush to fight that Comite so thoughtlessly, we wouldn't be in this situation. Now Serena and Bonnie have to fend off by themselves!"

"Hey, don't blame me for that! It wasn't me attacking those stupid rocks what caused the cave to collapse!" Theo protested. "Didn't you hear that roar before it happened? I'm sure whatever roared caused it!"

"Theo has a point," Ash intervened. "Though, that means that whatever made the cave quake is still out there, and it might do it again. So all the more reason to move as quickly as possible."

"Pikapi!" Pikachu nodded.

"What are we going to do if we find the thing that's causing the quakes?" Theo asked, his voice having a small edge of fear.

"I don't know. But that's the more reason to avoid unnecessary fights," Ash warned. "Our Pokemon can't fight forever, so let's make sure they're fresh for the battles we can't avoid."

...

Meanwhile, in another side of the cave, Serena and Bonnie continued their trek, followed closely by Chicoatl. They had encountered a few hostile Pokemon that attacked her, such as a bunch of Tonemy or a lone combative Dunsparce, but nothing Serena's Pokemon couldn't handle. Though, after some time, they didn't encounter anymore hostile Pokemon. The girls decided to enjoy the respite as long as it lasted.

And the moment of peace allowed Serena to tackle a certain topic.

"So, Chicoatl," Serena began, drawing the attention of the bird-like Grass-type. "Not that we don't enjoy your company but... is there

any reason for why did you decide to tag along?"

"Chic?" Chicoatl asked, tilting her head once again.

"Like I say, don't get me wrong, I don't mind that you decided to tag along," Serena continued. "It's just that... well, after what happened between you and Selkid, it's kind of unexpected that you want to spend more time with us."

"Coatl," Chicoatl replied, her body shifting in a way that made her look like she was shrugging.

"Maybe she liked having other Pokemon to sing with. Even if Selkid didn't get along that well with her," Bonnie surmised.

"Chic, coatl!" Chicoatl chirped in agreement.

"Really?" Serena asked, genuinely surprised.

Suddenly, a roar echoed through the tunnel, causing the two girls and lone Pokemon to freeze with shock. Bonnie yelped, and clung to Serena's leg, while Chicoatl also huddled with the two girls.

"It's that thing again! It's going to bring the cave down!" Bonnie cried, burying her face into Serena's side.

"N-No, it's not. This one sounds a little different..." Serena said, trying to steel herself, mostly from Bonnie's sake.

The roar was heard again, and this time it seemed to be closer. Bonnie dared to open her eyes, and saw the huge shadow of a horned being projected on a nearby wall illuminated by the fluorescent crystals. "AAAAAAHH! It's here!" Bonnie yelled, as she hid behind Serena, who took a pokeball with a trembling hand.

Then, the shadow began to shrink little by little, until whatever was projecting it finally came into view: a rather cute four legged, dinosaur-like Pokemon, no bigger than Sylveon with dark blue skin, and a cloak of white fur with teal spots covering its head and back,

obscuring its eyes. Two stubby brown antlers poked out of its head, going through the fur cloak.

"Huh? That's it?" Bonnie asked, now feeling a little embarrassed for crying in fear of such a small and cute looking Pokemon.

"Weird. The guide didn't say anything about a Pokemon like that living in this cave," Serena said, as she pulled out her Pokedex to scan it.

" Fafurr, the, Antler Pokemon. Ice/Dragon. This Pokémon's shaggy coat keeps it warm in freezing weather. They are sought after by hunters for their silky fur."

The Pokedex also said that Fafurr's habitat was the icy mountains of East Tandor. Does this mean that this Pokemon has been taken away by Team Omega, but somehow escaped? After all, the Pokedex did say they were valuable.

"Fafurr? Did you find something?" a new voice said, this one belonging to a male human.

And coming from the same tunnel as Fafurr did, an old man emerged. Despite his age, the man was tall and had an imposing build. He was wearing a dark blue cloak that covered his entire body, complete with a hood, that obscured most of his face, except for part of a very thick gray beard. On his left hand there was a long staff of black metal, topped by the stylized head of a dragon.

"Oh," the man said, upon seeing Serena and Bonnie. "I wasn't expecting to find any travelers here. Especially ones as young as yourselves. What are you doing here, young ladies? This place has become quite dangerous as of late. Especially for somebody too young to be a trainer," the old stranger said, laying his unseen eyes on Bonnie.

"We didn't came here alone. There was a quake, and we got separated from the rest of our friends," Serena explained. "We hope

to get together with them at the exit."

"I see. In that case, allow me to escort you two to the exit. I can't, in good conscience, leave you two alone in such a place like this," the old man offered.

Serena took a moment to weigh his offer. What if this stranger was somebody shady? Like a Team Omega member? Even if Serena didn't get any bad vibes from him, it wasn't like her intuition was infallible. Then again, if this man had ill intentions, he would have acted on them already, no need for her to lower her guard. Besides, he was right that this cave was too dangerous to traverse without the company of another trainer.

"Alright. Thanks for your help, um..."

"Oh, where are my manners? Here I am talking with you, and I didn't introduce myself," the man said, before pulling his hood back, revealing his face, which was mostly covered by a gray beard. Even his eyes were obscured by thick eyebrows of the same color. "My name is Vaeryn, son of Einryn. At your service."

"Hello. My name is Serena. Um, daughter of Grace?" she awkwardly added, trying to match the archaic way the man used to introduce himself. "And this is Bonnie."

"Daughter of Meyer!" she chimed in. Then, she showed Vaeryn Dedenne. "And this is Dedenne, son of... another Dedenne, I guess?"

"A Dedenne..." Vaeryn said, looking at the Antennae Pokemon with interest, stroking his beard. "That's not a Pokemon you can see around these parts."

"Hey Dedenne, how is that you never told me about your parents?" Bonnie asked.

"Nenen?" Dedenne shrugged.

"We aren't from here. We're from Kalos," Serena clarified.

"Kalos... ah yes. One of my daughters went there for her honeymoon. She spoke rather glowingly of the region," Vaeryn said, smiling a little under his beard. "She insisted her mother and I should visit it, but alas, I never seem to find the time to do so. But I digress. I see there's a member of your little group you have yet to introduce," Vaeryn said, motioning to Chicoatl.

"Oh, Chicoatl isn't our Pokemon. She has been following us around," Serena explained. "Not that we mind her company."

"She's been following you? All the way from Baikal Jungle?" Vaeryn asked. "You must have made quite the impression on this little one to inspire her to follow you for so long."

"Baikal Jungle?" Bonnie asked.

"Yes. That's the place where her kind lives. Didn't you come from there?" Vaeryn asked.

"We come from Burolle Town. We found Chicoatl on the Baa Grasslands, on our way here," Serena told him.

"Hmmm, I, I ponder, what might have caused this little one to stray so far away from her home?" Vaeryn mused to himself. "But that's a question for another time. I'll escort you to the exit. Fortunately, I've been on this cave many times, and I know it like the back of my hand."

With Vaeryn leading them, the group continued walking, Serena and Bonnie feeling a little relieved over this kind stranger making their trek through the cave a little easier. They walked in silence for a few minutes, until Serena opened her mouth to speak, her curiosity pushing her to learn more things about their new companion.

"Say, sir, are you from East Tandor?" she asked.

Vaeryn turned at her. "What makes you think I'm from there?"

"Your Fafurr," Serena pointed at the small Pokemon walking besides Vaeryn. "The Pokedex says that they can only be found there."

Vaeryn chuckled. "Yes, that's true. But maybe I just visited East Tandor in the past, and during my stay there I caught this Fafurr."

"Oh. Yes, you're right..."

"But to answer your question, yes, I'm from East Tandor. From the north, to be precise," Vaeryn clarified.

"And what are you doing here, then?" Bonnie asked. "Looking for Mega Stones or fossils?"

"Sometimes I do come here looking for Mega Stones, but not today. In fact, today I wasn't even planning to come here," Vaeryn said, leading the girls into a chamber with two possible exits, and headed towards the leftmost one. "I was supposed to meet with a Pokemon Professor at Comet Port, north of here. But then I heard from the Rangers about something, or someone, that was disturbing the peace of this place, so I decided to come here first and see if I could do something about it."

"A Pokemon Professor? You mean Bamb'o?" Bonnie asked.

Vaeryn shook his head. "Nay. Said Professor is not from here. In fact, if I recall correctly, I believe he's from Kalos as well," he chuckled. "Such a coincidence, huh?"

A Pokemon Professor from Kalos? Could it be Sycamore? But if that was the case, what was he doing here? Then again... Mega Evolution was pretty big in Tandor as well.

As Serena pondered over that, they continued walking. They could hear the roar of running water, probably from another underground river. Said roar could be heard clearer and clearer the more they

moved, until they found an obstacle they wouldn't be able to traverse.

"Oh," Vaeryn sheepishly said. "This... wasn't here the last time."

Much to their surprise, they found their path was blocked by a river of torrential water. There was no way of telling how deep it was, and the speed of the water would make it impossible to waddle through it.

Bonnie turned angrily towards Vaeryn. "I thought you said you knew this place like the back of your hand!"

"And it's a statement I stand by," Vaeryn replied. He stroke his beard. "Hmmm... the quakes must have brought an underground river to the surface, or maybe falling rocks formed an impromptu dam that diverted the course of a river. Though, the question is, how are we going to cross it?"

Serena tried to think in a solution. Maybe have Braixen use her psychic powers to levitate them to the other side? Nah, that would be asking too much of her. Have Pancham create a bridge with Stone Edge? She didn't know if the attack could reach the river's floor, and even if he could, it wouldn't be very safe. If Ash was here, maybe Greninja could...

"Hey, wait a minute," Serena said, grabbing one of her pokeballs. "I know how we can cross. Selkid, go!"

Serena opened the pokeball while keeping it on her hand, releasing her first Tandorian Pokemon. Selkid looked at her, expecting orders, before she noticed Chicaoatl. The Green Chick Pokemon looked at her, but Selkid averted her gaze.

"Selkid, can you use Ice Beam to freeze the water and create a bridge?" Serena asked.

"Sel, selkid!" Selkid agreed.

It took her a few minutes, but after several Ice Beams, Selkid had created a bridge of ice solid enough to resist their weight without crumbling, and in no time, they were able to reach the other side.

"Yay, we crossed! Thank you Selkid, you were awesome!" Bonnie praised.

"Sel.." the Sea Nymph Pokemon rubbed the back of her head sheepishly.

"Yeah. Good work Selkid," Serena said. "Better keep you outside. We might need your help again."

"Your Selkid looks well trained. And she appears to have enough trust in you, something that's not easy to achieve, as Selkid are naturally distrustful of humans," Vaeryn observed. "May I ask how did you catch one?"

Looking at Selkid, Serena recalled how they met. "Long story short, I rescued her from a bunch of Pokemon traffickers. Team Omega. Have you heard of them?"

"Aye. I heard of them from the Rangers. The idea that such despicable people that treat Pokemon in such vile ways tainting my beloved region with their presence fills me with disgust," Vaeryn said, his voice acquiring a dangerous edge.

"I wanted her to return to her home in the sea but... well, she preferred to stick with me," Serena explained.

"And it seems that that Selkid isn't the only Pokemon affected by such a magnetism, if this little one is of any indication," Vaeryn said, motioning at Chikoatl. Then, he looked at Selkid again, more specifically, her tail. "Is that a Mega Stone tied to her tail?"

"Yeah. Those traffickers wanted to sell her alongside a Mega Stone. She liked the Mega Stone, so she uses it as an accessory," Serena told him.

"Yes. Pokemon are naturally drawn to their Mega Stones, even if they haven't reached the evolutionary stage where Mega Evolution is possible," Vaeryn mused. "And given that you're from Kalos, I assume that you also possess a Keystone?"

"Well... to tell the truth... no, I don't," Serena said, feeling a little embarrassed for some reason. Not that she had to, it's not that every Kalosian trainer uses Mega Evolution, right?

But apparently, that's what Vaeryn thought. "You don't? That's mostly odd. My daughter told me that trainers of Kalos are rather fond of Mega Evolution, almost as much as the good people of Tandor."

"Well, that's true, but as you can see, it doesn't apply to every Kalosian trainer," Serena said sounding a little more defensive than she intended.

"I see. My apologies if I crossed a line with my words, my intentions were far from ill," Vaeryn sincerely said. "But, given that you have a Pokemon capable of Mega Evolution with the matching Mega Stone... would you be interested in acquiring a Keystone? I'll understand if you don't, but I can't help but feel it would be such a waste of potential if you didn't."

The Kalosian girl pondered over the question. Truth be told, Mega Evolution wasn't something that drew her interest in the past, given that none of her Pokemon were capable of Mega Evolution. Though, now that it was no longer the case, then the offer was worth considering.

"... yes, I'd like to get a Keystone," Serena admitted. "Problem is, I don't know where I can get one."

Despite his thick beard, Serena could see Vaeryn's lips curving into a smile. "In that case, let me tell you about this Mega Evolution Master that hails from the same town as I do, who gives Keystones and Mega Stones to those trainers he deems worthy of them..."

...

"Owten, Confusion!" Theo ordered.

The eyes of Theo's Owten began to shine with a blue light, as glowing outlines of the same color appeared around the swarm of Tonemy around them paralyzing them in place.

"Colarva, Powder Snow!" Ash shouted.

"Eletux, Electroweb!" Clemont ordered.

Colarva exhaled a gust of extremely cold wind from his mouth, while Eletux fired an orb of yellow electricity from the bulb of his longest tail, which turned into an electric net mid flight. Both attacks slammed into the immobilized Tonemy, knocking some of them out. When the effect of the Confusion disappeared, the remaining Tonemy quickly flew away from there, letting out high pitched squeals of terror.

"Yeah! Take that! That's what happens when you mess with the mighty Theo!" Theo boasted.

"Those Tonemy weren't that big of a deal. The ones we had to face in Passage Cave came in greater numbers," Clemont said as he returned Eletux to his pokeball.

"Even then, its for the best if we keep fighting wild Pokemon to a minimum," Ash said, returning Colarva as well. "Given how long we've been walking, I believe we must be pretty close to the exit. But I could be wrong."

"Pika!" Pikachu energetically said, as if stating he'd fight no matter what.

Ash was going to say something, when they were interrupted by a crackling noise, followed by a flash of light. Theo's Owten, glowing

brightly, began to grow in size and change its shape, turning into a completely new Pokemon.

"Shou!" the evolved Owten cried.

"HELL YES! About time for one of my Pokemon to evolve!" Theo cheered, before he pulled his Pokedex. "Alright, let's see what you are..."

"Eshouten, the Observer Pokemon. Normal/Flying. They are shy and elusive, found only at night around mountains. Their incredible eyesight allows them to see clearly up to a mile away," the Pokedex droned.

"Congratulations, Theo!" Ash said, slapping the younger boy on his back. "Seeing one of your Pokemon evolving for the first time is an unforgettable experience."

"And soon the rest will follow," Theo proudly said. "Now take a good rest, Eshouten! You deserve it!" he said, before returning his newly evolved Pokemon to its pokeball.

"Alright, let's-"

GROOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRR!

There it was, that terrifying roar again, echoing through the cave. And this time, it sounded to be much, much closer. And just like it happened before, the entire cave began to shake. Small pebbles and some sand fell from the roof. The three boys paled.

"RUN!" Ash yelled, snapping the other two out of their horror, the three of them quickly rushing forward.

As they ran, they crossed paths with several Pokemon, also running away in a mad dash, neither party paying attention to each other. As they ran through several tunnels, they reached a large chamber with

a single exit that sloped upwards. The exit was illuminated by dim sunlight. Such sight filled the hearts of the three boys with hope.

"There's the exit!" Theo triumphantly said, as he pointed forward.

"What about Serena and Bonnie? We can't leave without them!" Clemont said.

Before Ash could say anything, the ground beneath their feet literally exploded, throwing the three boys backwards, as a massive, two-headed orange skinned serpent emerged from underground, letting out a deafening roar.

Ash looked up to the threatening figure of a Terlard towering over him and his friends. Given Ash's previous experience with such Pokemon, encountering one wouldn't have merit any reaction if it wasn't for the fact that this Terlard was, at the very least, twice as big as the one Ash fought on Passage Cave. Which proved to be a formidable opponent.

"Ash! What... what is that thing!?" Clemont asked, dragging himself away from the giant beast.

"It's a Terlard! I saw one before, but this one is so much bigger!" Ash said, helping Clemont back on his feet.

Terlard roared once again, making the chamber violently shake.

"Ahhh... aaaahhh... AAAAAAAAAHHHH!" Theo screamed as he ran away, disappearing through the tunnel they had crossed to enter the chamber.

"Theo! Where are you going!?" Ash shouted.

But Ash's thoughts were interrupted by the giant Terlard, letting out another ground-shaking roar, before one of its heads breathed a torrent of purple and amethyst dragon-shaped energy blast at Ash

and Clemont, forcing the two boys to jump out of their spots. Ash immediately unbuckled a pokeball from his belt.

"Ash! Don't tell me you're planning to fight that monstrosity!" Clemont shouted, his whole body quivering in fear.

"What other option do we have? I don't think he is going to let us leave if we ask him politely," Ash said, before tossing his pokeball forward. "Greninja, I choose you!"

The capture device opened up, releasing Ash's best choice for this kind of opponent, who looked up at his large foe, and slipped into a fighting stance.

Seeing Greninja seemed to soothe Clemont's fear a little, as he managed to regain some composure, picking up a pokeball as well. "I guess that... Terlard? Is a Ground-type, right?"

"Ground and Dragon," Ash replied.

"None of my Pokemon are very suited for a Pokemon like that, but I think this one might be able to assist Greninja to some degree," Clemont said, tossing the pokeball as well. "Eevee, I choose you!"

Eevee emerged from the mass of light released by the pokeball, ready to battle. But the moment he saw the titanic Pokemon in front of him, his fur bristled in terror. "EVOI!?"

"I know it looks big, Eevee! But don't worry, you won't be fighting it head on!" Clemont told his second most recent Pokemon. "Just let Greninja fight and help him whenever you can!"

"Ev..." Eevee said, not entirely convinced.

"Greninja, Ice Beam!" Ash ordered.

Greninja nodded, and cupped his webbed hands, forming an orb of icy energy between them. Thursting said hands upwards, the orb exploded into a focused beam of ice that smashed against one of the

Terlard's heads, which cried in pain. The other head, meanwhile, fired another Dragon Pulse at Greninja, who was forced to cancel the attack and jump sideways.

"Water Shuriken!"

This time, Greninja formed a mass of water between his hands that quickly took the shape of a four pointed star. The moment the attack was formed, the Ninja Pokemon tossed it upwards. The attack flew towards one of the heads, exploding into a torrent the moment it made contact. Terlard cried in pain once again.

"Yes! Good one Greninja! Keep going on!" Ash cheered his Pokemon.

Terlard's two heads pierced the Ninja Pokemon with a fierce glare, and the eyes of one of them began to glow green. Then, to Ash and Clemont's surprise, a pair of glowing green vines burst from under Greninja's feet, wrapping around his legs and tying themselves in a knot. Greninja struggled, tried to move, but the vines kept him firmly in place.

"What the... that Pokemon can use Grass Knot?" Ash asked in shock.

The other head looked upwards, and summoned a multitude of rocks, floating above it. The head motioned downwards, sending the barrage of rocks towards the immobilized Greninja.

"Eevee, cut those vines with Iron Tail!" Clemont ordered.

"Ev!" Eevee cried, rushing towards Greninja as his tail glowed with a silvery light. He then jumped, and bringing down his metallic tail like it was a sword, it cut down the Grass Knot binding Greninja to the ground.

Greninja quickly picked up Eevee and dashed out of there before either of them could be buried under the brutal Rock Slide. Ash then

noticed that the eyes of one of the heads were glowing green again.

"It's going to use Grass Knot again!" Ash shouted. "Greninja, Double Team!"

Suddenly, the chamber was filled by two dozen Greninja copies, just as a second Grass Knot formed around one of them, dispelling it. Both Terlard's heads growled in confusion, before going for another Rock Slide, bombarding the area below them in order to get all the fakes in one swoop.

"Ash, let's attack at once, one head each!" Clemont suggested, his voice almost drowned by the thundering noise the boulders crashing against the ground made.

"Very well!" Ash nodded. "Greninja, Ice Beam towards the right-side head!"

"Eevee, Shadow Ball towards the head on the left!" Clemont followed.

Once again, Greninja fired a beam of powerful freezing energy towards one of the heads while Eevee shot a sphere of darkness towards the other. Both attacks connected, resulting in explosions that produced clouds of white mist and gray smoke, respectively. But when they dispelled, the heads only appeared to be a little more hurt than before. And a deal bit angrier.

"Wow. This Pokemon is truly something, isn't it? But I should have assumed it would be a challenge given its size," Ash said, before he threw a punch upwards. "Then again, you still haven't seen our full power! Come on Greninja! Let's beat it TOGETHER!"

...

On another side of Comet Cave, Serena, Bonnie and Vaeryn were running through a tunnel that, hopefully, should lead them to the exit, with Fafurr, Selkid and Chicoatl trailing behind. At least that's what

Vaeryn had assured them. They heard that horrible roar again, and just like before, chunks of the roof began to fall off. It looked as if the cave would collapse entirely anytime soon.

"Keep running!" Vaeryn urged. "The exit is in the chamber just ahead of us!"

"Let's hope you're right!" Bonnie replied, agitated.

The cave shook again, followed by another roar, one that sounded to be really close.

"Vaeryn, I think we're heading towards whatever is making all that noise and causing the quakes!" Serena told him, worried.

"It may be. But this path is our only exit," Vaeryn stated.

"And what are we going to do if that thing is waiting for us?" Serena asked.

"It isn't obvious? We battle that beast," Vaeryn said with grim determination.

Leaving the tunnel, the trio entered the chamber, where, indeed, the responsible of the quakes was there.

"WHOA!" Bonnie cried in shock, instinctively hugging Dedenne.
"How is that Pokemon so big?"

"That Terlard is truly big, indeed," Vaeryn said, seemingly unsurprised at its size. "It must be the culprit behind the quakes, which are putting the rest of the Pokemon of this cave on edge. It needs to be pacified before it brings the whole cave down."

The two headed serpent in front of them was a Pokemon Serena hadn't seen before, at least not in person. However, she remembered when Ash told him about his fight against such Pokemon in Passage Cave.

" *Did Ash fight such a big Pokemon all by himself?*" she mentally wondered.

Serena was snapped out of her thoughts by Bonnie's loud voice. "Look! There are Ash and Clemont! They're fighting it!"

"Then again, you still haven't seen our full power! Come on Greninja! Let's beat it TOGETHER!" Ash said, seemingly not noticing the new arrivals.

"GRE!" Greninja shouted, crossing his arms in front of his face as a spiraling tower of water formed around him. Inside said tower of water, Greninja began to transform. The water then began to recede, condensing in the shape of a shuriken on Greninja's back, revealing the Kalosian water type's empowered form.

"What... what was that?" Vaeryn asked mostly to himself, his voice soft and full of awe, his eyes hidden beneath his thick eyebrows focused on Greninja. "Did that Pokemon just Mega Evolve? But... no, it didn't look like Mega Evolution..."

"Greninja, Water Shuriken!" Ash commanded.

"Eevee, Shadow Ball again!" Clemont followed.

Greninja grabbed the Water Shuriken stuck to his back, and tossed it towards one of the Terlad's heads, while Eevee fired an orb of darkness towards the others. Each of the heads countered the attacks by using Dragon Pulse, not only nullifying them, but tearing through them, forcing Greninja and Eevee to jump away.

"Come on Selkid! We need to help Ash!" Serena said. "Ice Beam!"

Selkid opened her mouth, firing a beam of icy energy at the colossal Pokemon, hitting one of its heads, which cried in both pain and surprise. This drew Ash and Clemont's attention towards her and her group.

"Serena!" Ash shouted.

"Bonnie!" Clemont shouted almost at the same time. "You're okay!"

The head that took the Ice Beam shook the frost that formed around it, and glared at the tiny Water and Fairy type. Its eyes began to glow green.

"Serena, watch out-" Ash tried to warn.

"Sel!?" Selkid cried as a pair of green glowing vines emerged from under her feet and tied in a knot around her, leaving her immobilized on the spot.

The Terlard head that was looking at Selkid conjured more floating boulders above her, before it let them fall. Serena panicked, watching in horror how Selkid, who was still struggling with the Grass Knot, was about to be buried alive under tons of rocks.

"Greninja, Night Slash!" said Ash's voice.

"Eevee, Iron Tail!" Clemont shouted as well.

Greninja and Eevee leaped in the direction of the falling boulders, the former with a sword of darkness forming on his hands, the latter with his tail becoming rigid and glowing with a metallic sheen. The two Pokemon managed to smash and cut the falling boulders before any of them could touch the Sea Nymph Pokemon.

Unfortunately, they didn't have the chance to help any further, as they were forced to run in different directions to avoid the Dragon Pulse from the other head.

Serena finally snapped from her shock, and realized she needed to help her Pokemon as soon as possible. But before she could take a step, a green blur blitzed past her. "Huh?"

Her brain took a second to process Chicoatl rushing towards Selkid, her glowing beak spinning like a drill, using it to tear the vines

holding Selkid in place to shreds.

"Sel?" Selkid asked, surprised at the Grass-type's help.

"Chico!" Chicoatl happily chirped.

Relieved that Selkid was no longer a sitting Ducklett, Serena's eyes moved towards the two headed giant beast that occupied most of the chamber. That thing was able to match Ash-Greninja in terms of power, and its two heads allowed it to keep its attention to multiple opponents. Beating it would take more than mere brute force.

"We need to distract the heads, but how...?" Serena murmured, the gears in her head turning, until they produced a result. "I have it! Selkid, quickly, use Sing!"

Selkid nodded, and as Greninja and Eevee drew attention of the two heads to themselves once again, took a deep breath and began to sing as loudly as possible. The attack manifested in the form of ethereal musical notes that slowly flew towards the the Terlard heads, but they didn't seem to have any effect on it.

"Serena, it's not working!" Bonnie pointed out, worried.

"Selkid's voice isn't powerful enough to reach such a big Pokemon," Serena realized, clasping her hands. "But how could we...?"

Before she could finish her ruminations, Chicoatl walked next to Selkid, and began to sing alongside her using Grass Whistle. Rather than the more cheerful and fast melody she sung back in the forest, she made an effort to match Selkid's slower and more melodious song. The floating musical notes grew in size and acquired a green glowing outline. The two Terlard heads appeared to grow tired and drowsy upon hearing the soothing duet.

"Yes! Now it's working!" Serena cheered, beaming at Chicoatl.

"Thanks a lot, Chicoatl!"

"Come on Ash, Greninja! Hit it hard right now!" Bonnie hollered.

Ash nodded, and fixed his eyes on the sleepy Terlard. "Come on Greninja, Water Shuriken! As big as you can!"

Greninja grabbed the Water Shuriken from his back, placed it above his head, and willed it to grow almost thrice its original size, before launching it at the two headed beast.

"Selkid, Ice Beam on the shuriken!" Serena ordered.

"Sel!" Selkid cried, firing another beam of chilly energy at the flying four pointed watery star, freezing it white. The frozen shuriken smashed against the two heads, bursting into thousand ince shards, while the Terlard heads cried in pain.

Ash smiked, victory at hand, and pulled out an empty pokeball.
"Now, let's-"

But before Ash had the chance to capture the giant Pokemon, the ground began to shake again, threatening to trip those around Terlard, as the two-headed Pokemon quickly burrowed underground. Once its body was completely buried, there was another rumble that hinted that the Pokemon was moving somewhere else, until the quake stopped completely.

"Huh? Where did he go?" Ash asked, looking around.

"Somewhere else. Probably its lair or another safe place where it can lick its wounds," Vaeryn said, as he walked forward.

"Congratulations for such a magnificent victory over such a mighty adversary, son. The two of you, as well as Serena, formed an incredible team."

"Thank you, uhhhh..." Ash began.

"Vaeryn, son of son of Einryn. At your service," the man said, making a reverence.

"Hi. My name's Ash... uh, son of Delia," Ash said, scratching his cheek, as Pikachu shook his head. "That's Clemont. Son of Meyer. And I guess you know Serena and Bonnie."

"Nice to meet you, sir," Clemont greeted him.

"It was a mostly fortuitous chance that our paths crossed, though one that I do not lament, for it allowed me to witness such an spectacular battle," Vaeryn claimed, his voice full of vigor. "Though, young Serena told me that there was another boy in your group... Thomas, mayhaps?"

"IT'S THEO!" Theo's voice shouted from the tunnel he had disappeared into, causing everybody to turn towards it. The redheaded boy's head peeked from behind a wall. "Uh... is that giant monster still here?"

Clemont shot the younger boy an unimpressed stare. Not only did he ran away, but he didn't even go that far, meaning that he could have helped them deal with that Terlard. "Yes, you can come out now. The chance to prove yourself a hero is long gone," the inventor deadpanned.

"W-Well, it's not that I wanted to be one!" Theo protested, clenching his fists, matching the disappointed stares of his temporary traveling companions with an angry glare of his own. "I only traveled with you guys because I wasn't allowed to enter this dumb cave alone! And since the exit is there, I no longer have to trail behind you! And you should leave as well before that monster comes back!"

And with that, Theo stomped towards the cave's exit.

"What was that, Theo? Oh yes, you're very welcome! No need to thank us for letting you travel with us," Bonnie said in a mocking tone.

"That's quite an... interesting kid," Vaeryn said.

"Guess that's one way to put it," Serena said.

"Hey Serena," Ash said, noticing another newcomer besides Vaeryn. "Is that the Chicaoatl that we met on the forest a couple days ago?"

Serena looked down at the Grass Chick Pokemon, and smiled. "She is. It seems we made quite an impression on her, given that she decided to follow us all the way here. If it wasn't for her, we wouldn't have been able to subdue that Terlard for Greninja to finish it off for good."

"Hey Serena, why don't you catch it?" Bonnie suggested. "They may have started with the wrong foot, but Chicaoatl and Selkid made quite the amazing team!"

"Chico!" Chicaoatl proudly chirped.

"Sel..." Selkid sheepishly cried, looking down. However, much to her surprise, Chicaoatl affectionately rubbed her head against Selkid, as if trying to comfort her.

"Yeah. Chicaoatl didn't follow us. She followed you," Clemont added.

Serena then knelt down, and looked at Chicaoatl's black beady eyes. "It is true, Chicaoatl? Do you want to travel with us? Would you like to join my team?"

"Chi, chico!" Chicaoatl happily chirped once again.

Serena smiled, and rose to her full height. She pulled out an empty pokeball, and gently tossed it at Chicaoatl. The Green Chick Pokemon was absorbed into the capture device, which dropped to the ground, and dinged without shaking even once, signaling a successful capture. Serena then picked the pokeball and showed it to her friends.

"Ta-da! I caught a Chicaoatl!" she cheered.

"Awesome!" Bonnie shouted.

"Congratulations, Serena!" Ash happily said.

"Now you have a full team!" Clemont pointed out.

Serena then looked at the pokeball fondly, almost feeling her newest Pokemon inside it. "Welcome to the team, Chiocatl."

"Alright. Now we should probably leave this cave and continue our journey. Theo was right about one thing, that Terlard might come back," Ash told the others, who nodded in return.

Vaeryn then took a step forward. "Pardon me for asking this, young man, but would it be okay for me to travel with your group, at least until I reach my destination?" the old man asked.

Ash smiled. "Sure thing. It seems you've been helping Serena and Bonnie when they were on their own, but even if you didn't, I see no reason to turn you down."

"I'm also okay with Vaeryn coming with us," Serena added.

"He can't be a worse companion than Theo, that's for sure," Bonnie said, crossing her arms.

"Excellent," Vaeryn said, smiling under his beard. The four children and the single adult then headed for the exit. "Because, until we reach my destination, I have quite a few questions about that Greninja of yours..."

Author's Note: Ah, I've been dying to get to this chapter, given that it has quite a few important events.

First of all is Serena catching Chicoatl. The original plan was to have her catch Chicoatl the previous chapter, but given that she didn't spend that much time with Chicoatl (plus how Selkid antagonized her), the capture didn't feel natural. That's why I had Chicoatl follow the group, mostly because of Serena, so the

two of them could spend more time together and make her capture have more emotional weight. So yeah, like Clemont said, Serena has now a full team, and she won't catch anymore Pokemon.

The second is Vaeryn's introduction. If you played the game, you'll know why he's important. I also had a lot of fun writing him with a Lord of the Rings-esque way of talking, which I feel it suits him.

For those who haven't played the game, yes, you also travel Comet Cave with Theo (since no one is allowed to enter alone the first time you visit it because of how aggressive the Pokemon inside are), Theo does runs away the moment the Terlard shows up (I made the Terlard giant (or an "Alpha", given PLA) since Ash already fought and defeated a normal Terlard before), but, unlike here, you never see Theo again until later, since several falling rocks caused by a quake prevent you from following him, or backtracking at all. Oh, and you don't meet Vaeryn until much later, but I made him appear here because of a little something I have planned for the next chapter ;)

Thanks to cricketlaxwolvesbandy, iacopo passerini, DryBonesKing, Fox McCloud, hirowriter, Guest and Viroro-kun for reviewing last chapter. And thanks a lot to Viroro-kun for his help on this chapter, whose edits and suggestions made it so much better.

I guess that's all for the time being. I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and don't forget to leave a review with your thoughts!

Old Masters, Young Challengers

Chapter 18:

Old Masters, Young Challengers

Route 5 - Tancoon Way

Tancoon Way turned out to be quite different from the rest of the routes the group had traveled through. While the previous routes had plenty of green grass and trees of a similar color, the trees here were shades of yellow, orange and red, making the place look as if it was permanently in autumn. Even if the grass was still green, it was a more muted shade compared to the bright one of green as the opposed bright shade from the previous route. It made the place look as if it was permanently in autumn, but But it couldn't be wasn't the case, given that the trees were lush with leaves, none of them having fallen to the ground.

"And none of the other Greninja from that village were able to emulate your transformation?" Vaeryn asked.

"I knew they were trying, but the last time I heard from Sanpei, he told me that neither him nor his older brother had been able to," Ash replied.

On their way to Comet Port, the town where Vaeryn would meet this professor, the old man had requested Ash to tell him everything about his Greninja, and to spare no details. So Ash recounted all the moments he had shared with the Kalosian starter: how he met shortly after arriving on Kalos, all the battles they had since then, evolving into Frogadier, Olympia's prophecy, the Ninja Village where he both evolved into Greninja and manifested the Battle Bond.

When they reached to that part, Ash also mentioned that according to the ninjas, another Greninja many centuries ago was also able to

undergo a similar transformation. This caught Vaeryn's interest, taking it as proof that Greninja's transformation wasn't something unique, and perhaps it could be replicated in another Pokemon.

"You know, I don't remember anybody showing that much fascination in my Greninja, sir," Ash pointed out. "Not that I mind, but most people just tend to go with it."

Well, there was also Lysandre, but Ash preferred to forget about the man.

"How could I *not* be fascinated, boy? A transformation not dissimilar to Mega Evolution, except without either a Keystone or a Mega Stone? If somebody told me about that, I would have never believed them! Heavens, I saw it with my own eyes, and I still don't believe it!"

"You also display quite the fascination towards Mega Evolution as well," Clemont pointed out.

Vaeryn chuckled heartily. "Why, yes! You can say that Mega Evolution is a subject that I'm very passionate about. I spent quite a good portion of my life studying its mysteries, albeit not exactly from a scientific standpointway, like the man I'm about to meet with does. My approach is more... philosophical and spiritual."

Ash nodded. Ash was reminded of Gurkinn, Korrina's grandfather and Mega Evolution Master, who also had a similar outlook on the topic.

"Mega Evolution is indeed big in Tandor, huh?" Bonnie echoed.

"Aye. Though, while most people, those from this region included, merely see Mega Evolution as a way to increase their Pokemon's power, me and those with a similar mind see it as much more," Vaeryn said. "Namely, we think Mega Evolution is the ultimate bond that can be forged between humans and Pokemon, and the means to truly understand one another. And this makes me wonder, how deep is the bond between Ash and his Greninja, being able to reach

such a transformation without the help of a Keystone and Mega Stone?"

"Well... as much as I like hearing that, I also like to think that the bond with other Pokemon is just as deep, even if I can't make them transform like Greninja does," Ash pointed out.

"Pikapi!" Pikachu energetically nodded.

"Oh, pardon me, my boy, if my words implied that your bond with your other Pokemon were lesser. It was far from my intention," Vaeryn apologized.

"Don't worry, it's okay," Ash said, smiling reassuringly.

Vaeryn nodded. "Thank you. Also, before we part ways, there's something I'd like to ask you, Ash. Would you mind battling me with your Greninja? I know I already saw it in action, but I want to experience a battle against him myself."

"Sure! I'd be glad to," Ash happily replied.

"Though, you better have a very strong Pokemon if you want to match Ash-Greninja!" Bonnie piped in.

"I can assure you that won't be a problem," Vaeryn confidently stated.

"Heh, you said that now, but wait until-" Bonnie interrupted herself, a frown developed on her face as a realization dawned upon her. "Hey, wait a minute! If you have a Pokemon so strong, why didn't you help us fight that giant Terlard before!?" she angrily asked.

Realizing that Bonnie made a good point, the rest of the group looked at Vaeryn. They weren't glaring at him or anything, just wanted to hear what he had to say in his defense.

"I was about to, but seeing Ash's Greninja distracted me. I also wanted to see not just his capabilities, but what the rest of you were

able to, and your skill as trainers," Vaeryn began. "I swear by Aotius and Mutios that, had the situation demanded it, I would have stepped up and dealt with that Terlard myself. I would never let any young trainer be harmed a victim of any harm in my presence."

They continued looking at him, weighing his words. While they believed him, it almost looked as if they found his excuse a bit flimsy, and he should have helped them anyway.

"I see you're not convinced. Perhaps I should have offered my help as well back then," Vaeryn reflected. "Alright, let me try to compensate you, then. Ash, if you are able to impress me during our battle, I will give you and your friends a very special prize that will be of great help during your journey."

"Really? That's awesome!" Ash cheered.

...

Thankfully, it didn't take very long for the group to reach Comet Port. Not that they didn't enjoy the wild beauty of Tancoon Way, but after so many days traveling through the Baa Grasslands, sleeping in the open, followed by their arduous trek through Comet Cave, civilization was a sight for sore eyes for Ash's group. While they were no strangers to sleeping in the open, after doing it for so long, sleeping in a Pokemon Center was much appreciated.

Comet Port was a sizable town, much larger than Moki and Kevlar Town, though not as big as the size of Nowtoch City. The town was mostly formed by one and two story houses made of wood with green roofs, but there were also large warehouses, mostly near the wharf -with several ships docked in-, where the load carried by ships was stored before it was sent away on trucks.

"Comet Port. Here we are," Vaeryn announced. "Once you want to go to East Tandor, you'll have to come here in order to board a ferry. Well, either here or Bealbeach City, but the price tickets are much cheaper here, hehe."

Wasting no time, the group headed to the Pokemon Center. Not only to have their Pokemon restored to full health and book a couple rooms, but also because they were curious they were also curious about this scientist Vaeryn was about to meet.

"Ah, there it is," Vaeryn said, looking at a man sitting at one of the tables in the lobby. A tall, handsome looking man with dark hair that the group was very familiar with.

"No way! It's Professor Sycamore!" Bonnie loudly said.

Upon hearing his name, the Kalosian Professor turned around towards the source of the voice, and smiled upon seeing the group.

"Hey, it's you guys," Sycamore said, getting up and walking towards them. "Fancy to see you here. Such a small world, huh? So, Ash, Serena, Clemont, Bonnie. I trust you've been okay?"

"Hey there, Professor!" Ash greeted him.

"Of course. A Kalosian Professor expert in Mega Evolution. It couldn't be any other but you," Serena said, recalling what Vaeryn told her.

"And I see that you've been acquainted with Gym Leader Vaeryn," Sycamore mentioned.

There was a collective gasp, as the group of four looked at the old man with a sudden sense of awe.

"Gym Leader...?" Ash repeated, while Serena pulled her Pokedex, and began to furiously type something on it.

"Indeed, young man. Didn't I mention it?" Vaeryn not-so-innocently asked, a wide smile forming under his beard. "It must have slipped my mind. You know, in my old age, my memory isn't what it used to be..."

"Not only is he a Gym Leader," Serena said, having found information on Vaeryn on her Pokedex. "You're one of Tandor's three toughest Gym Leaders, as well as a Mega Evolution master!"

"No wonder you know so much about Mega Evolution..." Ash said in awe.

"Well... I do try, hehe," Vaeryn chuckled.

"That's why we're here. Mega Evolution in Tandor is just as popular as in Kalos, and it has been for quite some time, thanks to its abundance of Mega Stones. So it was only logical to come here in order to continue our research on Mega Evolution," Sycamore explained. "And I couldn't think a better way to start than meeting the region's foremost Mega Evolution expert."

"Of course," Ash agreed, before he realized something. "Wait a minute... we?"

"Exactly, we," a familiar voice said behind them.

Ash turned around, and saw a tall black haired boy wearing a distinctive blue scarf, accompanied by a redheaded girl whose hairstyle was reminiscent of a Chespin, wearing a green hat.

"Alain! Mairin!" Ash said, smiling wide. "Heh, I knew that if the Professor was here, you wouldn't be far."

"It's great to see you again, Ash," Alain said, as both rivals shook hands. This allowed Ash to notice the new bracelet with a Keystone on it. Last time he saw the Kalosian teen, he had given it to the police since it had been given to him by Lysandre. "Huh? I see you got another Keystone."

"Yeah..." Alain, taking a look at it, his expression becoming unreadable. "Professor Sycamore was kind enough to get me another one to replace the one I got from..." He said, frowning a little as he left the line unfinished. He then smiled at Ash, as if pushing

away from his mind some thoughts that troubled him. "I take you're going to challenge the Tandor League?"

"You can bet on it! I have two badges already!" Ash proudly said. "What about you? Are you going to take part in the League too?"

"Indeed! And he has four badges already!" it was Mairin who replied.

"Four? Whoa!" Ash gasped. "I better step up my game then!"

"At first I only challenged Gym Leaders here as part of our research, since all of them use Mega Evolution," Alain explained. "But now that I know you're also going to take part in the league, I'm going to enjoy it much more!"

"What, weren't you happy with kicking Ash out of a league once that you plan to do it again?" Bonnie deadpanned, shooting Alain an irritated look.

"Bonnie!" Clemont shouted.

Alain either didn't hear her or ignored her. "But you know what? As great as our last battle in the Kalos League was, now that I see you here I can't wait anymore! I challenge you to a battle, Ash!"

Before Ash could reply, Vaeryn cleared his throat. "While your enthusiasm is encomiable, and I understand why you would want to battle a trainer like Ash if you know him beforehand, I'm afraid that he promised to battle me when we arrived at Comet Port."

"Oh..." Alain said, deflated and a little disappointed. "Guess I'll have to wait my turn."

"Heh, you're surely popular around here, Ash," Sycamore joked.

Ash just chuckled bashfully, before he turned at Vaeryn. "If you don't mind, would you like to have our battle now?"

"I was about to suggest it, my boy, and I'm glad that we were thinking the same thing," Vaeryn said.

...

A few minutes later, everybody was on the battleground next to the Pokemon Center. Ash and Vaeryn were on their spots, with Clemont in the middle, playing the role of referee. Everybody else was on the sidelines, watching with interest.

"Vaeryn promised Ash a reward for this match. His Gym Badge?" Serena muttered to herself. Though louder than she thought, given that Alain heard her.

"No. Only matches that take place on Pokemon Gyms and with an official referee can result in winning a badge," her fellow Kalosian explained. "If Vaeryn gave Ash a badge now, not only the badge wouldn't be valid, but Vaeryn would get into trouble with the Pokemon League."

"Then what-" Serena was about to say, before being interrupted by Clemont.

"The battle between Ash and Vaeryn will be a one on one with no time limit! The trainer who faints the opposite Pokemon first will win," Clemont began. "Trainers, select your Pokemon!"

Ash already had a pokeball in his hand before Clemont could finish explaining the rules. "Greninja, I choose you!"

Ash tossed the pokeball forward, releasing the Kalosian Water-type starter, quickly slipping into a fighting stance.

Vaeryn didn't react, but a subtle shift in his body language revealed that he was excited to see Ash's Pokemon again. A pokeball appeared in his hand. "Show your worth, Ampharos!"

Vaeryn's pokeball opened when it hit the ground, and the Electric-type Pokemon emerged from it. Ash quickly noticed the collar around its neck with a Mega Stone attached on it.

"Begin!" Clemont shouted.

~Ash (Greninja) VS Vaeryn (Ampharos)~

"Let's begin with Water Shuriken!" Ash ordered.

"Gre!" Greninja nodded, forming a watery star between his hands, before tossing it at Ampharos.

Watching the four star projectile fly towards his Pokemon, Vaeryn wasted no time and issued an order. "Ampharos, counter it with Thunder Punch!"

"Am!" Ampharos cried, as it twisted the end of its arm into something resembling a fist, which crackled with electricity, before punching the Water Shuriken, which was shattered into a million electrified water droplets.

"Excellent! Now Dragon Pulse!" Vaeryn followed.

"Dodge it while getting closer and use Night Slash!" Ash replied.

Ampharos took a deep breath before releasing a purple and amethyst dragon- shaped energy blast at Greninja, who dodged as he rushed forward, as a sword of pure darkness formed on one of his hands. Like a blue blur, Greninja bridged the distance between himself and the Light Pokemon, delivering a powerful slash across its chest.

"Phaaaaa... !" Ampharos cried.

"Well done Greninja! The first hit is ours!" Ash cheered. However, his joy was about to be very short-lived short lived.

"Thunderbolt!" Vaeryn ordered.

"Aaaaam..." Ampharos began, as its body crackled with electricity.

"Greninja, quickly, move back!" Ash urged.

"PHAROS!" Ampharos cried, releasing the stored electricity in the form of multiple yellow lightning bolts.

Greninja hopped backwards as fast as he could, but he was too close to Ampharos to properly dodge the Thunderbolt, taking it in full.

"Greninja!" Ash cried.

"Whoever wins a battle isn't that whom strikes the first hit, but the last," Vaeryn told Ash, his tone carrying a scolding edge.

"Well, that Thunderbolt is far from being the last hit of the battle!" Ash proclaimed. "Night Slash once again!"

"Parry with Thunder Punch!" Vaeryn replied.

Once again, Greninja moved into close quarter distance, another blade of darkness in his hand, and delivered a swipe at Ampharos, who parried it with one of its electrified punches, and countered with the other, but Greninja's speed allowed him to dodge it. The two of them continued to trade blows that were either parried or dodged, until Vaeryn called for the next course of action.

"Focus Blast!" the old man shouted.

Ampharos pushed Greninja backwards, and formed a red orb of energy between its paws.

"Very clever," Serena heard Sycamore say. "Ampharos is a very slow Pokemon, so Vaeryn is playing defensive and goading Ash into getting closer, enduring Greninja's hits, but countering with something much more powerful."

"Yeah. Focus Blast is a strong move offset by its low accuracy, but from that distance, Greninja will have a hard time trying will have it

hard to dodge it," Alain added, before he narrowed his eyes.
"Though... Ash doesn't appear to be very concerned with that."

"Greninja, Water Shuriken! Make it as big as possible and use it as a shield!" Ash shouted.

"Gre!" Greninja said, forming a Water Shuriken twice as big as normal, and placing it so its blunt side would face the incoming projectile.

The orb crashed against the Water Shuriken, resulting in an explosion that canceled both attacks, also producing a shockwave that pushed Greninja backwards. However, the Ninja Pokemon managed to use the momentum to do a backflip in mid-air, before gracefully landing on his feet.

"Thunderbolt!" Vaeryn replied.

"Avoid it with Double Team!" Ash ordered.

As Vaeryn's Ampharos directed multiple lightning bolts towards Greninja, a multitude of illusory copies littered the battleground, much to Ampharos' confusion. Some of the copies were dispelled by the Thunderbolt, but most of them remained, including the original.

"You won't dodge this one. Ampharos, Thunder Punch on the ground!" Vaeryn said, hitting the floor with the bottom of his staff.

"Greninja, jump into the air!" Ash said.

Just as Ampharos' electrified fist hit the ground, releasing a circular electric shockwave that expanded outwards, dispelling the rest of the copies at once, Greninja leaped into the air, avoiding the attack.

"Now, Ice Beam!" Ash said, thrusting a punch forward.

"Greeee... !" Greninja began, forming an orb of ice between his webbed hands, before using it to fire a beam of frigid energy at his foe. "NINJA!"

Vaeryn was unable to issue another command, and the attack hit Ampharos. The Light Pokemon cried, as its body was slowly covered in frost.

"Now, Night Slash!"

Letting gravity pull him down, Greninja aimed his body so he would fall near the shivering Ampharos, as another blade of darkness was conjured in his hand. The Light Pokemon couldn't react in time, and Greninja delivered a powerful swipe across its chest, carrying so much power, it knocked the Electric-type backwards.

"Yes! Direct hit!" Bonnie said, getting up and bouncing up and down. "Go Ash, go Greninja!"

"Indeed. Your start may have been a little sloppy, but you managed to match my battle pace quite admirably," Vaeryn praised. He then pressed a switch under the staff's dragon head, causing it to open its mouth, revealing a Keystone. The old man grabbed the Keystone, and said: "I believe this is enough for a warm-up. Should we begin the actual battle?"

Ash smirked confidently. "We're ready for anything you throw at us!"

Vaeryn matched Ash's smirk with one of his own. "In that case.." he raised the Keystone above his head. "Ampharos, my old friend! Let our bond bring forthforward the power within, and unleash it like a storm! Mega Evolve!"

Both the Keystone and the Mega Stone attached to Ampharos' collar began to glow, and fired beams of different colors towards each other. The beams clashed, and merged into one, and Ampharos began to glow as its body changed, the helix of Mega Evolution flashed before it once the transformation was finished.

"Oh my goodness... !" Bonnie said, looking at Ampharos with sparkles in her eyes. "Mega Ampharos is so cute! Look at that mane! And that tail! It's so fluffy I'm gonna die!"

"You're going to need more than fluffiness to bring us down!" Ash said, crossing his arms in front of his face, a move Greninja mimicked. "Come on Greninja! Let's do it TOGETHER!"

Trainer and Pokemon brought their arms outwards, and Greninja was surrounded by a vortex of torrential water that formed around him. Behind the water tower, one could see how Greninja changed forms as the Battle Bond was triggered. Lastly, the summoned water condensed into a single four point star that was attached to Ash-Greninja's back.

Vaeryn couldn't repress an awed "ohhhhhhh" as he witnessed the transformation.

"Last time, I was only able to catch a glimpse of that transformation from a distance. Seeing it whole, and in front of me, it was simply incredible," Vaeryn said.

"If you liked that, you're going to like this even better!" Ash said. "Water Shuriken!"

"Counter with Dragon Pulse!" Vaeryn replied.

Greninja grabbed the shuriken on his back, and launched it towards Ampharos, spinning so fast it resembled more a blue disc more, while the Mega Evolved Pokemon fired another purple and amethyst dragon- shaped stream of energy. The two attacks clashed in the middle, the ethereal dragon and spinning water star grinding against each other for a couple seconds, before Ampharos' attack won the struggle, tearing through the shuriken and barreling towards Greninja.

"Greninja, jump out of the way!" Ash commanded. Thankfully, Greninja reacted in time, and jumped aside, avoiding the Dragon-type move.

"Whoa, Mega Evolution made Ampharos really strong," Serena noted. "Its Dragon Pulses were nowhere near as powerful."

"That's because Ampharos has gained the Dragon-type upon Mega Evolving. So Dragon-type moves like Dragon Pulse become more powerful as long as Ampharos remains in that state," Sycamore explained.

"Whoa, Pokemon can gain new types upon Mega Evolving?" Bonnie asked, looking awed.

"Pokemon can gain new types upon evolving normally, so why should Mega Evolution be different in that regard?" Sycamore said with a smile.

"Other Pokemon also change types. My Charizard, for example, trades its Flying-type for Dragon-type," Alain added.

After the brief explanation, the spectators returned their eyes to the battle, where Ash was once again on the offensive.

"Get close and use Night Slash!" Ash commanded.

"Gre!" Greninja said, rushing forward, two blades of dark power appearing on each hand.

"Stop him with Thunderbolt, Ampharos!" Vaeryn said, slamming the bottom of his staff on the ground.

"AAAAMP!" Ampharos bleated, its whole body crackling with electricity, before releasing all of it in the form of a yellow electric storm. "ROOOOS!"

"Greninja, avoid it with Double Team!" Ash replied.

A multitude of Greninja clones appeared around the original, quickly hiding him. Several lightning bolts struck them, making them disappear, but the original remained untouched. All the Greninjas quickly surrounded Ampharos and prepared to attack.

"Ampharos, Cotton Guard!" Vaeryn shouted.

Ampharos' mane and tail began to glow with a white light, as balls of cotton quickly appeared around the Light Pokemon, covering it almost instantly. The moment Greninja hit, he was only able to shave some cotton off of Ampharos.

"Now, Thunder Punch!" Vaeryn replied.

Just as quickly as they appeared, the cotton puffs forming the unlikely armor disappeared, revealing Mega Ampharos, already lunging towards the surprised Greninja, electrified fist ready to strike.

"Greninja, dod-!"

But Greninja was unable to react in time, and Ampharos' attack landed, its improvised fist slamming into the amphibian's face, the hit launching him backwards as electricity ran through his body, bouncing painfully on his back. Ash winced in shared pain every time Greninja's body hit the ground.

"Well done, Ampharos! Focus Blast, now that he's off balance!" Vaeryn said.

"Greninja, deflect it with Aerial Ace!" Ash said.

Ampharos formed an orb of energy between its arms, before launching it at Greninja. As the sphere of destruction zigzagged its way towards the Ninja Pokemon, Greninja jumped back on his feet, and both arms began to glow with a white light. He managed to stop the projectile barreling towards him before it could hit him with both arms, and carefully not to detonate it, he pushed it towards the sky.

"Well done! Now, Water Shuriken!" Ash followed.

Greninja once again reached to his back in order to grab a watery star, a second one quickly forming it to take the first's place, and tossed it towards Ampharos.

"That again? Ampharos, another Dragon Pulse!" Vaeryn said, his voice carrying an edge of irritation.

Just like it did before, Ampharos fired a dragon-shaped purple and magenta energy beam towards the incoming spinning shuriken. And just like it did before, Ampharos' attack overpowered Greninja's, and barreled towards the Water and Dark-type.

However, unlike the previous time, Ash and Greninja were ready for this.

"Greninja, Ice Beam! Quickly!" Ash shouted.

Greninja cupped his hands, forming an orb of icy energy, before thrusting his hands forward, the white sphere of light exploding into a beam of freezing power. Once again, the two attacks clashed, but this time, it was the Dragon Pulse who was pushed backwards as the Ice Beam dangerously got close to Ampharos.

"Ampharos, let the attack strike you!" Vaeryn ordered.

"Huh!?" came the collective reply from the audience. Well, except Alain, who was watching the battle deep in thought, and didn't open his mouth.

Despite the order, Ampharos didn't hesitate, and let the super effective attack hit it. The Light Pokemon bleated in pain as ice and frost began to cover its body.

"Now, Thunderbolt!" Vaeryn ordered.

As it was being frozen, Ampharos' body crackled with yellow sparks as its body gathered electricity, before being released. However, it wasn't released in the form of one or many electric bolts as it normally was, but through Greninja's Ice Beam, which acted as a makeshift conductor.

"Greninja-"

But Greninja was unable to cancel the attack in time, and took the attack in full. But Pokemon and his trainer yelled in pain. The two of them fell to one knee.

"Time to finish this! Focus Blast!" Vaeryn said, hitting the ground with the bottom of his staff.

A yellow orb of destructive power appeared between Ampharos hands, and launched it towards Greninja, still on his knee. Even if the orb zigzagged erratically, it was obvious that it would hit the Ninja Pokemon until he jumped out of the way.

"G-Greninja... you have-"

Too late. The attack landed, and Greninja was engulfed by the resulting explosion, the shockwave launching him backwards, landing on the ground on his back with a painful thud. The Battle Bond was dispelled as Greninja returned to his regular form.

Clemont raised a hand in Vaeryn's direction. "Greninja can't fight anymore! The winners are Vaeryn and Ampharos!"

Ampharos let out a sigh of relief as it sat on the ground, returning to his regular form as well. Vaeryn's expression was unreadable.

"A magnificent victory against an excellent opponent, Ampharos. You fought with courage and determination. Take a well deserved rest," Vaeryn said, returning his Pokemon to its pokeball.

"Ash!" Serena cried, as she bolted towards her friend. She knew better than she wished how much of a toll the Battle bond could take on Ash, especially when Greninja lost. "Are you okay?"

"I'd say I'm fine, but you'd call me a liar," Ash said, chuckling a little. "But I'll be. Nothing a little rest can't fix."

That answer seemed to placate the honey blonde.

"You did your best, Greninja. We'll do better next time," Ash said, as he returned the ninja Pokemon to his pokeball.

"Now," Vaeryn said, as he began to walk towards Ash and Serena. "I believe I promised you a prize for agreeing to take part in a battle against me, did I not? And I'm a man that keeps his word."

"But... I didn't win," Ash weakly said.

Vaeryn chuckled, and shook his head. "Didn't you listen to me, or did you forget what I said? I never said you had to beat me, Ash, but to impress me. And impress me you did."

Ash grinned. "Well, even if I lost, it's great to hear that I made a good impression on you. I'd hate to make a fool of myself in front of one of Tandor's greatest trainers."

"In fact, it was a rather narrow defeat, if I'm being truthful. Letting Ampharos endure that Ice Beam in order to use it as a conductor was a gamble I wasn't sure it would pay off," Vaeryn admitted. But before Ash could reply, he pulled what appeared to be a rectangular case from within his cloak, and handed it to Ash. "Here's your prize. I'm sure you'll find it to your liking."

Ash took the case, just as Clemont, Bonnie, Alain, Mairin and Professor Sycamore approached Ash, clearly moved by curiosity over Vaeryn's gift. The Pallet Town native opened the case with a soft click, and took a look inside.

"Whoa!" Ash said.

Inside the case were six items, lined in two rows of three. One of the rows were Keystones. The others were Mega Stones, each of a different color: one forest green and light yellow, the second black and red, and the last one deep blue and bright yellow.

"It's a rather fortuitous coincidence that I was carrying the same number of Keystones as trainers are in your group, Ash," Vaeryn

said, clearly enjoying his and his friends' reaction. "I'm sure they'll be mostly useful for your journey."

"By the way, at the Bealbeach City department store there's a jewelry shop that sells accessories that can be used to hold a Keystone," Sycamore suggested. "It certainly beats keeping it in the pocket all the time."

Bonnie, however, crossed her arms and pouted. "Not fair! Why don't I get a Keystone?"

"Come on Bonnie, you aren't a trainer. Why do you want one?" Clemont asked.

"I'll be ten next year, so I can be a trainer by then! Think how awesome it would be to start my Pokemon journey with a Keystone!" she hotly replied.

Clemont sighed. "Alright, I'll try to get one for you. And if I can't by the time you begin your Pokemon journey, I'll talk with dad so he gives you his Keystone. And if he doesn't want to, I'll give you mine. Happy now?"

Bonnie weighed Clemont's words. His body language relaxed a little. "... for the time being."

"What kind of Mega Stones are those?" Alain asked. "I don't think I'll ever see them before."

"They are a Metalyxite, Archillesite and Electruxolite, which can Mega Evolve the evolved forms of the Tandor starters," Vaeryn explained. "They are also the most common Mega Stones found in Tandor. Others are a little harder to come by."

No one in the group had a Pokemon that could evolve into Archilles, but Ash had an Orchynx and Clemont a Eletux, which could use those Mega Stones once they evolved. And Serena also had a Pokemon capable of Mega Evolution once Selkid evolved.

Ash nodded, and closed the case. "Thanks a lot, Vaeryn. I couldn't have asked for a better gift."

Vaeryn nodded. "Normally, the more advanced Gyms have a minimum requirement of badges in order to accept a challenger," the old man began. "Not me. I have a different requirement: only those who master Mega Evolution have the right to challenge me to a battle for a Gym Badge. I can tell that one day in the near future, you'll come to Snowbank Town in order to acquire that badge. In the meantime, use that gift to prove yourself worthy of a rematch with me, one with far more at stake."

"Don't worry, Vaeryn, I will," Ash excitedly said.

"Welcome to the club, Ash," Alain said, slapping Ash on the back. "I can't wait to see what you'll be able to do once you get a hold of Mega Evolution, on top of what you do with Greninja. Heh, I'd love to challenge you to a battle for old time's sake, but I don't think Greninja is in any condition to battle against my Charizard after such an intense battle."

"Come on Alain, you're always using Charizard! Give it a rest!" Mairin protested. "And it would be so much better if you showed Ash the new Pokemon you just caught."

That is immediately got Ash's attention. "Really? Did you catch new Pokemon? So did I!"

"In that case, how about if we have a battle with Pokemon we caught in the region then?" Alain suggested.

"Yeah! Count me in!"

"Yes, but first," Serena intervened. "Let Ash rest a little. The previous battle took a toll on him on top of Greninja. And neither of you want a battle when one side is not at their 100%, right?"

Neither boy contested her.

...

About an hour later, once Ash had rested and had a light snack to recover some energies, both he and Alain were ready for their first match since the Kalos League finals. Vaeryn was now taking Alain's place among the small public, while Clemont continued serving as referee.

"The battle between Ash and Alain will be a one on one with no time limit! Both trainers will use two Pokemon, and they are allowed to switch Pokemon. The first trainer whose two Pokemon are unable to battle will lose," Clemont began. "Trainers, select your Pokemon!"

"Linkite, go!" Alain said, throwing a pokeball forward.

The capture device opened up, releasing Alain's first pick for the battle. Once it materialized, one of the weirdest Pokemon they had ever seen appeared before them. It looked like a floating Substitute Doll, chained by the neck to an iron ball painted to resemble a pokeball. It was rather gloomy looking.

"Linkite, the Forsaken Pokemon. Ghost. The spirit of a Pokemon that died inside its pokeball. It has forgotten its original appearance so it takes the form of a Substitute decoy," Ash and Serena's respective Pokedex explained.

"Wow, that's... grim," Serena said, a little shaken by the description.

As Ash pocketed his Pokedex, his hand reached for a pokeball.
"Alright, then this is my choice! Orchynx, I choose you!"

The pokeball opened upon hitting the ground, releasing the Grass and Steel-type Tandorian starter. The moment the Kitten Pokemon materialized, Linkite's shadow stretched towards Orchynx, linking both Pokemon through it.

"Huh? What was that?" Bonnie asked upon noticing the weird phenomenon.

"Linkite's ability, Shadow Tag," Vaeryn replied. "Shadow Tag binds the opponent's Pokemon, stopping it from being recalled. The rules might allow Ash to switch Orchynx if he wants to, but Linkite's Shadow Tag won't let him."

"So Ash has to win this battle with Orchynx then," Serena concluded.

Clemont raised both hands, before bringing them down in a chopping motion. "Begin!"

~Ash (Orchynx, ?) VS Alain (Linkite, ?)~

"We'll take the first move! Linkite, Night Shade!" Alain ordered.

"Liiii..." Linkite wailed softly, as it opened its eyes, releasing pitch black energy beams with red edges from them.

"Orchynx, counter with Energy Ball!" Ash shouted.

"Orr!" Orchynx meowed, as she opened her mouth, forming a green energy sphere in front of it, before firing it forward.

The two attacks collided in the middle, neither being unable to overpower the other, resulting in an explosion, which created a cloud of smoke.

"Orchynx, quick! Use the cloud of smoke as a cover to get close to Linkite!" Ash said.

"Don't let her! Night Shade again!" Alain replied.

As Orchynx entered the cloud of smoke, Linkite began to fire more Night Shades at her, but none of its attacks found its marks, just as Ash had hoped.

"Now Orchynx, Energy Ball!" Ash said.

The cloud of smoke, already dispelling, glowed green for a second before a sphere of the same color came out of it, and smashed right

into the Forsaken Pokemon's face, before it detonated.

"Yes! Direct hit!" Ash cheered, pumping his fist. "Now Orchynx, get close and use Metal Claw!"

Like a green bullet, Orchynx rushed towards Linkite, still recovering from the Energy Ball, as her paws began to glow with a metallic shine. She then pounced towards her opponent, delivering a couple of strikes.

"Liiiiiin!" Linkite cried.

"Linkite, no!" Mairin shouted, clearly worried over her friend's Pokemon's doing poorly against Ash.

A worry that, tellingly, Alain wasn't sharing. If anything, he appeared pleased with the way the match had started.

"Pain Split!" Alain commanded.

Oh, so that 's why.

A red outline appeared around both Orchynx and Linkite, as some of the latter's wounds began to disappear, and reappeared on Orchynx.

"Well, that was unexpected," Ash admitted.

"Yeah. I admit, Linkite isn't a Pokemon that suits my style of battling, but I decided to use it for the sake of expanding my horizons," Alain began to explain. "Raw power isn't the only path to true strength."

"Let's see how well that works for you then. Orchynx, Bullet Seed!" Ash commanded.

"Deflect it with Gyro Ball!" Alain ordered.

Orchynx opened her mouth, and fired a salvo of glowing yellow seeds at the Ghost-type Pokemon, who sat on the iron ball it was

chained to. It, and started to spin in place, deflecting the incoming projectiles.

"Very well, Linkite! Now onto the offensive!" Alain said, thrusting a fist forward.

"Ki, ki!" Linkite said, as it advanced towards Orchynx, like a threatening spinning top.

"Orchynx, keep moving! Don't let it touch you!" Ash said.

Orchynx nodded, and began to jump from one side to another, using her superior speed to avoid the spinning Linkite whenever it came too close. After a few seconds, Linkite's spinning speed began to drop.

"Well done! Now use Metal Claw!" Ash said.

Like it happened before, Orchynx pounced at Linkite, her paws glowing with a silvery sheen, as it delivered a couple of powerful slashes at the Forsaken Pokemon. Once she was done, Orchynx's body flashed a red aura for a second.

"Huh? What happened there?" Bonnie asked.

"That's Metal Claw's effect. After being used, it has a chance of increasing the user's attack power," Sycamore explained.

"So lucky," Serena said, smiling.

"Yeah! Ash now has this on the bag!" Bonnie cheered.

"Come on Alain, you can still win!" Mairin shouted.

"Of course I can. Linkite, let's recover some health with Drain Punch!" Alain said.

Linkite's iron ball began to glow with a white light as it began to levitate, before Linkite sent the ball flying towards Orchynx, the chain

increasing its length.

"Quickly, jump over it!" Ash told Orchynx, who leaped above the incoming ball, gracefully avoiding it. "And now, Energy Ball from the air!"

Alain gritted his teeth as he watched Orchynx preparing to deliver the finishing blow towards the wide open Linkite. He sighed in resignation, and said:

"Destiny Bond."

"No!" Ash panicked. "Orchynx, stop-"

But it was too late. Linkite began to glow with a purple aura, as grey smoke surrounded its body. A couple seconds later, the Energy Ball hit it in full, knocking it out. Then, once Orchynx landed on the ground, she was surrounded by the same aura, let out a meowlet a meow that sounded more like a ghostly wail, and collapsed.

Clemont raised both hands. "Both Pokemon can't fight anymore! The first match is a draw!"

Both trainers sighed, and returned their Pokemon. While being clearly unsatisfied with the result of their matches, they thanked their Pokemon for a job well done.

"Sorry for ending the match in such a cheap way," Alain quietly admitted. "I didn't know any other way to beat your Pokemon."

"No need to apologize. Destiny Bond is a move as valid as any other," Ash reassured, as he picked his next Pokeball.

"I guess I still need to work more with Linkite," Alain said, mimicking Ash.

"Alright, this is my second Pokemon! Dunsparce, I choose you!" Ash said, tossing the pokeball forward. It opened upon hitting the ground, releasing the Normal-type worm.

"Duuuun..." Dunsparce said, looking at Alain.

"A Dunsparce. Not a Pokemon I'd envision you having," Alain commented, before his mouth curved into an expectant grin. "I'm sure this is a Pokemon that's going to make quite an impression on you, Ash. Xenomite, go!"

The capture device opened up, and from a flash of green light that left everybody except Sycamore and Mairin a little stunned, Alain's Pokemon emerged.

"Xeno!" it cried.

"Is... is that... !?" Vaeryn said, agitated.

Sensing the old man's uneasiness, Sycamore placed a hand on his shoulder. "It's okay. There's nothing to worry about."

Xenomite was a little smaller than Dunsparce. Five green stumpy legs protruded from the sides of its black body, which ended on a long tail with a green tuft at the top, which it wagged lazily. Its head was shaped like a rounded V. It had two large green eyes, and a green nose that reminded of a gas mask. Both Ash and Serena pulled out their Pokedex to scan this weird new Pokemon.

"Xenomite, the Mutant Pokemon. Nuclear. A species that spontaneously appeared in irradiated zones. It is thought to have hatched from a corrupted egg."

"Nuclear!?" Ash asked in shock.

"Is... is that a type?" Serena asked.

"Indeed it is. While not officially recognized as a type in most circles due their sheer rarity, they are in the region of Tandor," Sycamore began. "Normally, Nuclear-type Pokemon exist in areas with strong radiation, places where no other living being can live, such as the central mountains of Tandor, which hold large uranium deposits."

However, thanks to Tandor's many nuclear power plants, many Nuclear-type Pokemon had left their normal habitats and moved to places near them."

"Whoa..." Ash said, looking at Xenomite with curious eyes. Could he be able to catch a Nuclear Pokemon?

"But... I thought there were only eighteen types!" Clemont said.

"There may be many Pokemon types out there that we don't know about, either because of their rarity, or simply because they live in zones where no human has gone before," Sycamore continued.

"You shouldn't have caught that Pokemon, boy," Vaeryn gravely said, glaring at Alain. "Those creatures are as dangerous as they are unpredictable."

"What? But Xenomite has been such a sweetheart!" Mairin protested.

"Yeah. I might not have it for long, but Xenomite hasn't given me any troubles so far," Alain replied.

"I'm aware that Nuclear Pokemon can be temperamental, but this Xenomite behaves exactly like any other Pokemon," Sycamore added.

Vaeryn grumbled something unintelligible under his thick beard. "Very well then. If you trust you can tame those Pokemon, I won't stop you. But I still stand by what I said."

"Perhaps if you show Vaeryn how Xenomite fights, he might change his opinion on it?" Ash suggested.

"Guess there's no harm in trying," Alain agreed. "Let's go!"

"This time, we'll take the first move!" Ash said. He was about to give an order, when a thought assaulted his mind. " *Wait a minute... that*

Pokemon is of a type I never fought against before. How does the Nuclear type relate to the other types?"

"Ash?" Alain asked upon seeing the boy from Kanto hesitate.

This seemed to snap Ash out of his brief trance. "Guess I'll have to find it myself. Dunsparce, Rollout!"

"Dun, dun!" Dunsparce cried, as he curled into a spinning ball, and rolled his way towards Xenomite.

"Xenomite, dodge it!" Alain ordered.

Xenomite managed to jump aside just as Dunsparce reached it, rolling past it. Dunsparce, however, made an impromptu U-turn, rolling in the Mutant Pokemon's direction.

"Xenomite, Protect!" Alain shouted.

Xenomite faced the rolling Dunsparce, and erected a green energy barrier around itself, allowing Dunsparce to crash into it, canceling the attack and causing the Land Snake Pokemon to bounce backwards.

"And here's a Nuclear-type move for your viewing pleasure! Xenomite, use Gamma Ray!" Alain said, making a waving motion with his arm.

Xenomite raised its tail, as an orb of green energy, similar to Energy Ball, but a more intense shade of green and with green sparks crackling around it, formed on its tip, before the orb exploded into a beam of the same color. It, directly landed on Dunsparce, producing an explosion of the same color.

"PAAAAAARCE!" Dunsparce cried in pain, as he was lunged backwards by the power of the attack.

"Such a potent attack!" Ash said, worried for his Pokemon, but also in awe.

"That looked like a super effective move," Serena surmised. A conjecture Ash was inclined to agree with.

However, looking at Alain and Sycamore, the grins they were showing made Ash wonder if Serena was right or not.

"Dun!" Dunsparce cried, as he got back on his proverbial feet, and fiercely glared at Xenomite, whose resolve didn't waver in the face of Dunsparce's anger. The yellow snake hadn't taken that Gamma Ray kindly.

"Dunsparce, if we want to beat this Pokemon, we'll need to be careful, okay? I don't think you can take many more attacks like that one," Ash warned his combative Pokemon, fearing that he might do something stupid in his attempt to get back at it."

"Dun..." the Land Snake Pokemon reluctantly agreed.

"Let's keep going on! Xenomite, Gamma Ray again!" Alain ordered.

"Evade it with Dig!" Ash quickly replied.

As Xenomite prepared the Gamma Ray, Dunsparce burrowed underground, and was safe below the battleground when the Mutant Pokemon fired its attack. Then, before it could have any time to react, Dunsparce tunneled towards Xenomite's position, bursting from under him, sending him flying into the air.

"Well done, Dunsparce! Now hit it with Ancient Power before it hits the ground!" Ash said, pressing the advantage.

"Duuuuun... !" Dunsparce began, as he summoned several glowing orbs of golden light spinning above him, which quickly grew into golden boulders that he launched towards the still airborne Xenomite. "Parce!"

"Xenomite, destroy that attack with another Gamma Ray!" Alain shouted.

Rather impressively, Xenomite was able to right its position mid air, and fired a third Gamma Ray from its tail towards the incoming Ancient Power, reducing the golden rocks to mere pebbles.

"Dunsparce, get close and use Poison Jab!" Ash ordered.

"Protect!" was Alain's reply.

Ash Dunsparce crawled towards the falling Xenomite, his stinger tail was covered in a purple aura, which he directed towards Xenomite as the Nuclear-type touched the ground. However, the moment it happened, the Mutant Pokemon was encased once again inside a protective forcefield, which successfully blocked Dunsparce's attack.

"Now, Sludge!" Alain added.

Xenomite fired a stream of toxic purple mud through its tail as if it was a pressure hose, hitting Dunsparce in the face.

"Duuuuun!" the blinded Dunsparce began, thrashing wildly in a vain attempt to lash out at Xenomite.

"Now, Gamma Ray!" Alain said.

"Dunsparce, Dig!" Ash desperately said.

Unfortunately for Ash, Dunsparce barely registered the order, and was unable to do anything to stop the Nuclear-type move from hitting him a second time, engulfing it in the resulting explosion. And that second time was what Alain's Pokemon needed to put an end to the fight, as once the resulting green cloud dispelled, Dunsparce didn't move.

Clemont raised an arm in Alain's direction. "Dunsparce can't fight anymore! The winner of this match is Alain!"

"Oh no..." Bonnie lamented.

"Yes! Alain won!" Marin cheered, as she jumped from her seat.

Both trainers sighed, one in resignation, the other in relief, as they returned their respective Pokemon and thanked them for giving their all. Then, they walked towards each other and shook hands once again as a sign of mutual respect.

"Great victory, Alain. It seems you're still the better trainer," Ash admitted.

"Thank you. Though, don't be so ready to put yourself down," Alain replied, smiling earnestly. "Even if we couldn't use our strongest Pokemon, it was an amazing fight on par to all our previous bouts. You always manage to push me like no other trainer has done."

"In that case, I take you're open for a rematch sometime in the future?" Ash suggested.

Alain's smile grew even bigger. "Do you really need to ask?"

"Boy, that Nuclear Pokemon was sure something," Ash said, as he and Alain began to walk towards the rest of the group, with Clemont trailing behind them. "Unlike Linkite, you were far more aggressive with it. It suits your style better."

"I better be. An aggressive approach is the only way to use a Nuclear Pokemon," Alain said.

"Huh?"

"You probably wonder how Xenomite's type interacted with othersreacted to other types, don't you?" It wasn't Alain, but Sycamore the one who answered. The man looked almost eager to divulge more knowledge over the mysterious type. "Nuclear-type Pokemon are vulnerable to pretty much every other type bar itself. That makes them relatively fragile, so a defensive strategy doesn't suit them."

"So that's why you used Protect so much," Clemont pointed out.

"Exactly. I need to be careful not to let Xenomite take many attacks, or else it might go down very quickly," Alain said.

"However, Nuclear-type attacks inflict great damage on Pokemon of any type. Only Steel and other Nuclear-type Pokemon are able to resist them," Sycamore finished. "In the hands of a careful and skilled trainer, a Nuclear-type Pokemon can be a powerful battler."

"And in the hands of a careless one, they can cause unimaginable damage," Vaeryn said, his scowl persisting.

"Would you think Alain is careless?" Sycamore asked.

Vaeryn took a few seconds to study the black haired boy with his eyes before giving an answer. "The kid's a talented and experienced battler, that's for sure. But that might make him grow confident, even overconfident, in his skill to keep such a beast under control," he harshly said. "Then again, after seeing that Xenomite in action, I must admit that Alain appears to have it under control. Let's pray it lasts."

"I don't know much about Nuclear Pokemon, but I do know that Alain is one of the best trainers I ever met," Ash said, his voice earnest and unwavering, taking a step forward. Alain smiled gratefully. "If there's somebody who can tame a Nuclear-type Pokemon, it's him."

Vaeryn didn't contest Ash, seemingly accepting the issue as settled.

"I think we all can agree that we were lucky to watch such spectacular battles," Sycamore began, changing the topic in an attempt to reduce the lingering tension. "Though, I'm sure that, after not one but two fights like that, Ash and his Pokemon are in some need of rest," this earned him a nod of approval from Serena.

"Vaeryn and I need to go already, since our ship will be sailing soon. Alain, Mairin, would you mind staying here until tomorrow with Ash and his friends?"

"Sure thing, professor," Alain said.

"That way, we can catch up!" Mairin chimed in.

"You need to go already?" Ash asked.

"Yes. Like the good professor said, our ship will be departing soon." he then looked at Ash and Alain. "I expect to see the two of you in my Gym in the foreseeable future."

"Don't worry, we will get there," Ash assured him.

...

An hour later, after walking with the two adult men towards their ship and seeing them go, the group of six were returning now to the Pokemon Center.

"Dinner now?" Ash asked. "I'm so hungry I could eat as much as a Snorlax!"

"Pika..." Pikachu shook his head.

"It's getting a bit late, so sure, why not," Serena agreed, as she looked at the sun in the horizon slowly set.

"By the way, where are you guys going now?" Ash asked Alain and Mairin.

"Before we meet up with him on East Tandor, Professor Sycamore sent us to an errand on Rochfale Town," Alain said.

"Rochfale Town? That's where my next contest is!" Serena beamed.

"Great! Then we can go all together!" Mairin cheered.

"What kind of errand did Professor Sycamore send you?" Clemont asked. "More Mega Evolution research?"

Alain shook his head. "Not really. You see, one of Tandor's three Pokemon Professors, Professor Cypress, is about to unveil her latest

invention, which she claimed it will be revolutionary. She wanted Professor Sycamore to be there to see it, but since he's going to be busy, he's sending us in his place."

"A revolutionary invention?" Clemont echoed, his interest peaking. "Did he tell you what kind of invention it was?"

Alain shook his head. "Not really. All I know it's that it's not related to Mega Evolution, since that's outside Professor Cypress' area of expertise."

"Do you want to come with us?" Mairin asked.

"Sure! If they let us go with you..." Clemont asked.

And thus, the group of six continued towards the Pokemon Center, as all of them wondered what such apparently marvelous invention could be.

Author's Note: Boy, I've been dying to get to this chapter, given how many things happened. Alright, let's unpack them!

First of all, no, Comet Port doesn't exist in the game either. I located it right on the beach that separates Route 5 from Route 12. I created it myself for pacing/convenience reasons, since it would be easier if the episode happened on an actual town rather than on some random beach. And yeah, Ash and co. will return here when it's time for them to go to East Tandor.

Next, Mega Evolution! Yeah, if it hasn't been obvious yet, I LOVE Mega Evolution, and there's no way I wrote a Pokemon fic where Ash and his friends didn't get it (if you saw the pictures I posted on the Ao3 version, this shouldn't come as a surprise, given that Ash, Serena and Clemont are holding Keystones in them). I was pretty bummed when they didn't get to use it in XY (despite everybody and their grandma using Mega Evolution), and while Ash-Greninja was nice, I still itched for the real thing.

And yes, I know that JN gave Ash Mega Evolution at last, but it was for a Pokemon I absolutely loathe (Lucario). Of course, it will be a little while until they start using Mega Evolution, but hey, they already have the means to do it.

And here comes Alain, the last of Ash's three rivals, and by far the most important one! Yeah, if you ever wondered why I had Ash take Greninja as opposed to other Pokemon, like Gabite or Pidgeot, this is the reason. Like many of you, I was left deeply unsatisfied with the way their rivalry was solved (I believe Ash was WAAAAAY past the point of needing moral victories), so I hope that I can provide a much better conclusion in this fic.

And lastly, we introduce the most important staple of Pokemon Uranium, Nuclear Pokemon! And yeah, I decided to give Alain one, since I feel it's a type that suits him and it doubles as a good way to introduce the type, and prepare the characters for when they meet them in larger numbers.

Thanks to Fox McCloude, hirowriter and Viroro-kun for reviewing last chapter, and special thanks to Viroro-kun for his invaluable work as a betareader.

Now, onwards to Rochfale Town, to Serena's next contest, and to see what Professor Cypress' amazing invention is (if you played the game, you should know what it is). In the meantime, don't forget to leave a review sharing your thoughts on this chapter!

The Future is Now, Thanks to Understandi

Chapter 19:

The Future is Now, Thanks to Understanding

Route 5 - Tancoon Way

Thankfully, the way from Comet Port to Rochfale Town was just as short as the road from Comet Cave to Comet Port. While the group of six left Comet Port in the morning, they managed to reach Rochfale Town shortly after noon.

"Here we are! Rochfale Town!" Mairin excitedly said, as she ran towards the sign that welcomed new visitors.

Welcome to Rochfale Town

Watch out for the falling boulders!

"Falling boulders!?" Bonnie repeated in horror, as she protectively held Dedenne.

"It must be some kind of prank..." Ash deduced. "I think."

"I think they must be talking about the mountainous area that surrounds the town from the west," Serena said, as she checked information on the town on her tablet. "Rock slides happen sometimes, and I'm not talking about the Pokemon attack."

"Makes sense. Besides, this doesn't look like a place where boulders fall often," Clemont noticed.

The group took a good look at the town as they walked in. It was a rural town, mostly made of one and two story houses of wood with red roofs. There were no asphalted roads, just tracks of dirt outlined by grass. In a way, it reminded the group of Moki town, only

replacing all the green with reds and oranges. And just like Moki Town, there was a larger and more modern-looking building on a small hill in the northernmost part of the town.

"That must be Professor Cypress' lab," Alain said.

"And look! There's the Contest Hall!" Serena excitedly said, as she pointed to the colorful building, which stuck out among all the wooden houses. "It feels like it's been ages since the last time I've been in a contest."

"Is the next contest today?" Mairin asked.

Serena shook her head. "In three days. That gives me enough time for some last minute training and to make sure my Pokemon are ready for it."

"Professor Cypress' conference won't be until the afternoon, so we'll have some spare time to spend as we please," Alain said.

"Great. Let's go to the Pokemon Center and have all our Pokemon checked," Ash suggested, something that all of them agreed with.

It wasn't hard to find the Pokemon Center, as it also clashed with the rest of the town's décor. Once they crossed the sliding doors and headed for the counter, where the blue haired Nurse Joy and her Aromatisse and Miasmedic were ready to attend to them, they were greeted by a familiar voice.

"Hey, it's you guys! Quite some time since we last saw each other!"

They turned around towards the source of the voice, and much to their surprise, it was Professor Bamb'o, who was sitting on one of the Center's tables, a cup of hot coffee next to him, working on something on his tablet.

"Professor Bamb'o!" Ash said, as he walked to greet the man, followed by the rest of the group. "It's so great to see you!"

"Heh, I see you picked up a couple of new friends, didn't you?" Bamb'o said, as he looked at Alain and Mairin.

"Oh right! These are Alain and Mairin. They're from Kalos too. They're here helping Professor Sycamore," Serena introduced the duo, who were looking at the eccentric man as if they were wondering if somebody who dressed and acted so casually was a Pokemon Professor. "Guys, this is Professor Bamb'o. He has a laboratory in Moki Town."

"Ah yes! Lily said that Sycamore was going to send somebody in his place," Bamb'o said, before he looked at Ash and his friends again. "So, I assume that you know about this afternoon's conference. Will you guys come too? Anybody can attend."

"If there's no problem, sure! I can't wait to see what this Professor Cypress is going to show," Clemont said, excitement bubbling within him.

"Oh! And before I forget, Natalie and Vitor are here too!" Bamb'o told the group. "They're sparring on a nearby battleground, in order to test their new Pokemon. You should go and take a look. I'm sure you'll find them interesting."

Before either of them could say anything, Bamb'o stood up and led the group towards the battleground just outside the Pokemon center. And just like he said, the Moki Town twins were there, engaged in a Pokemon battle.

"Ice Shard, Snopach!" Vitor ordered his pokemon, a small brown elephant with blue ears and tail, a white trunk and back, little tusks and black beady eyes.

"Counter with Brick Break, Slothom!" Natalie told her Pokemon, brown sloth with a yellow furry collar, yellow and black marks on its front paws that looked like plugs, and a dark blue bony crest above its eyes.

Vitor's Pokemon launched an ice missile towards Natalie's, which smashed it to bits with a chop of its glowing paw. It was that moment that the twins noticed the newcomers at the edge of the battleground.

"Hey look, it's Ash!" Natalie excitedly said.

"And Serena!" Vitor said, sharing his sister's enthusiasm.

The twins quickly forgot about their sparring match, and went to greet their friends from out of the region. While Professor Bamb'o introduced them to Alain and Mairin, Ash and Serena took a look at the Pokemon they were using to spar. At first sight, they didn't look like anything special, but if Bamb'o had told them they were, there must have been a reason. The duo took out their Pokedex in order to scan them.

" Snopach, the Tiny Tusk Pokemon. Ice/Rock. A Pokémon that roamed the tundra millions of years ago. They used their small tusks to dig up berries and roots under the ice."

" Slotholm, the Sloth Pokemon. Electric/Rock. A very lazy Pokémon that lived millions of years ago. They would climb to the top of trees and wait to be struck by lightning."

"Millions of years ago?" Ash echoed.

"Yeah-" Natalie began.

"That's right!" Professor Bamb'o quickly interrupted her, his voice carrying a hefty amount of enthusiasm. "Snopach and Slotholm were prehistoric Pokemon that lived on Tandor long before human beings existed, and sadly became extinct many years ago! Thankfully, thanks to our technological advances, we can bring extinct Pokemon back to life through their fossils!"

"... yeah," Natalie said, rolling her eyes a little. "Vitor and I got these when we were crossing Comet Cave."

"They were unearthed by a group of paleontologists we ran into," Vitor continued to explain. "Since we protected them from wild Pokemon that inhabited the cave, they gave us a couple fossils as a reward, and walked with us here in order to revive them into Pokemon. The rest of them are in Professor Cypress' lab."

"So lucky. I wish we also found a few fossils. But we only ran into an old man and a giant, two headed snake," Bonnie complained.

"That old man gave us Keystones and Mega Stones, Bonnie," Serena gently chided the younger girl.

She crossed her arms. "Which I didn't get. And I wanted a fossil..."

Serena rolled her eyes, but decided to ignore Bonnie. She crouched next to Snopach in order to see it better. "It looks pretty healthy. Are you going to use it during the next contest?"

"Oh, no. I only got Snopach a few days ago. Nat and I have been training them in order to help them catch up to the rest of our Pokemon, but Snopach is a little too green for anything yet," Vitor said.

"I'm sure that they will be great in battle once they get enough training," Ash said. "I've seen my own share of prehistoric Pokemon, and all of them were amazing."

"Hey, since you were in the laboratory, were you able to see what Professor Cypress is going to show?" Clemont asked the twins.

"Not really. Whatever they're preparing, they're rather secretive about it. They're afraid somebody might attempt a robbery or something like that before it can be officially unveiled," Vitor replied.

Bamb'o clapped Clemon'ts shoulder, startling the Lumiose Gym Leader a little. "Hey, calm down kid! Where's the fire? We're all going to see it in a couple hours! Try to relax a little, you'll live longer."

"Well, Clemont can't help it. He's really passionate about science and inventions almost as much as I am about Pokemon battles," Ash let out a good natured chuckle.

"Yeah, especially inventions that don't blow up," Bonnie deadpanned.

Before Clemont could protest, he was silenced by the noise of spinning rotors, first faint and soft, then progressively louder. Everybody turned towards the source of the noise, and saw a white, sleek looking helicopter approaching the town. On the sides of the helicopter there were two Ls written in bright red.

"Ah, of course he's here too," Bamb'o said, his voice losing some of its usual energy, as he removed his shades to look at the chopper better, who was descending. "He always likes to make such an entrance."

"Professor? Do you know who's coming?" Natalie curiously asked.

"Yeah, my senior," Bamb'o said. "We should better move. This battleground is the only place in the entire town big enough to fit a helicopter."

And indeed, much like Bamb'o had said, the helicopter was heading towards their position, the noise made by the propellers growing louder, while raising a strong gust of wind in every direction. The helicopter then landed on the battleground, and as its propellers' spinning began to slow down, the doors opened, and from the flying vehicle came out three figures: a man followed by a couple of younger women.

The man was middle aged, with shoulder length navy blue hair with a noticeable balding spot at the top of his head. His eyes were hidden behind a pair of opaque glasses. He was wearing a lab coat, completely buttoned. Under the coat he was wearing a white shirt with a red tie.

The two women following him were noticeably younger, and looked identical. Both of them had short hair with a long bang that fell on one side of their face, one of them having teal hair and the other bright brown. Both of them were wearing shades that hid their eyes. Like the man they were following, they were also wearing buttoned lab coats.

"Kids, this is Professor Randall Larkspur, the third and most senior Pokemon Professor in the region of Tandor," Bamb'o began, as he watched Larkspur and whom they believed were his assistants walking towards them.

Larkspur smiled upon seeing his junior. "Ah, Professor Bamb'o. I imagined we'd see you here," he began, extending a hand towards Bamb'o. "How is your new lab going?"

"Going well. A bit messy, but little by little, the place looks a bit more like a place of work and science," Bamb'o admitted.

"You could have worked in a *real* laboratory, but you keep rejecting my offers," Larkspur replied. "But hey, as long as you can 'fly on your own', everybody's happy, right?"

"Right," Bamb'o said.

Larkspur then took a look at the varied group of teens that was standing behind the Moki Town professor, and adjusted his glasses, scanning them with his hidden eyes. "You have quite the cadre of youngsters following you. Surely not all of them are your interns, are you?"

"Oh, no, no, no!" Bamb'o quickly replied. He then grabbed Vitor and Natalie and moved them towards himself. "Only these two. Natalie and Vitor. Well, there's also Theo, but he isn't here."

One of Larkspur's assistants came closer to the Professor and whispered something to his ear, which caused the man to nod.

"Oh, right! You're the children of our esteemed Chief Ranger, aren't you? As well as Doctor Lucille," Larkspur said, before his expression grew somber. "Her loss was a huge tragedy."

"You knew our mother?" Natalie asked.

"*Know* her? Child, I worked alongside your mother for years! The most brilliant mind I had the pleasure to meet and foster." Larkspur said with nostalgic fondness. "My team and I have been trying to continue her work with the notes she left behind, but alas, without her genius, our progress isn't as swift as we would have hoped."

The twins drank every word that the older Professor was saying. To Ash, they looked as if this was the first time somebody told them about their missing mother.

"Wow... can you tell us more about her?" Vitor asked.

"Er... of course, but I'm sure that your father has told you plenty of things about her, hasn't he?" Larkspur asked.

Vitor averted his gaze, and rubbed his arm, looking visibly uncomfortable. "Our dad... he doesn't like to talk about mom with us much..."

Natalie rolled her eyes. "He doesn't like to talk with us, period. We barely get to see him. He claims to be too busy with his job."

"Now, now, your father's job is quite an important one, given that he keeps the region safe," Bamb'o said, hoping to play peacekeeper. "And the rangers are more needed than ever now, with those Team Omega thugs causing trouble."

"Ah, yes, ehem, ah, a truly despicable bunch. Let's hope our Rangers can dismantle them and put an end to their operations," Larkspur said.

"Anyway, should I introduce you to the rest of this group?" Bamb'o offered. "This is Ash Ketchum, from Kanto. Serena Gabena, from Kalos. Clemont and his sister Bonnie, from Kalos too. And these are Alain and Mairin, Professor Sycamore's field researchers, who are here in his stead."

"From Kalos too," Mairin added.

"Uh..." Larkspur stuttered, before the other assistant whispered something in his ear, and nodded again. "Ah, of course! Alain and Ash, the winner and runner up of the Kalos Pokemon League! And Serena, the runner up to the Kalos Master Class Showcase! And the Lumiose City Gym Leader, on top of an engineer of renown, Clemont!" Larkspur said, before looking at Bamb'o. "You have the talent to surround yourself with promising youths, Bamb'o."

"What can I say? I can recognize potential when I see it!" Bamb'o shrugged.

Larkspur looked at his watch. "It seems that we've arrived a bit earlier than expected. Say, why don't we go inside and update me of everything of interest that has happened in West Tandor?" he asked, as he began to walk towards the Pokemon Center.

"Sure, as long as you tell me the same on your side of the pond," Bamb'o replied.

"I could, but I'm afraid that you'd end up extremely bored."

...

"I have to admit, these designs are truly impressive, especially coming from somebody so young," Larkspur said, his eyes looking at the screen of Clemont's laptop.

"Thank you, sir. It means a lot from somebody of such renown as yourself," Clemont bashfully replied.

The group was now sitting on a table in the Pokemon Center, alongside Larkspur and his two assistants. Alain and Mairin were sitting at another table with Bamb'o and the Moki twins, and were using their spare time to get to know each other better.

Upon hearing from Clemont, the old professor had shown interest in the Gym Leader's work. Clemont was able to show him a couple of his inventions he had on hand (thankfully, none of them exploded, a fact Bonnie was quick to point out) as well as others he was working on. When Larkspur asked for more, Clemont showed him the blueprints of future designs, as well as designs of inventions he didn't have on hand.

"Well, Bamb'o isn't the only one who likes to surround himself with talent," Larkspur said, adjusting his glasses. "You know, Clemont, my laboratory specializes in research, development and production of equipment and devices to improve the capabilities of Pokemon, as well as to help humans understand them better. And I think my team could benefit from somebody as bright as you."

"Really? Whoa, that's..." Clemont began, before a realization dawned upon him, curbing his excitement. "I'm afraid I have to decline. At least for the time being."

"Oh? Do you have any other commitments?" Larkspur asked.

"Yes. The reason I came to this region, actually," Clemont said, letting a little pride slide from his usual humble demeanor. "I've been hired to work on Nuclear Power Plant Epsilon."

"Nuclear Plant Epsilon?" Larkspur repeated, confused. "That... that can't be right. That power plant suffered a terrible meltdown ten years ago. The Rangers declared the whole island off-limits, and no one has been allowed there ever since."

"Oh, I know! But now that the radiation has subsided, they're working on a new power plant to replace the one that was destroyed, and I've been called to help them," Clemont explained.

Larkspur paid a lot of attention to every word that came out of Clemont's mouth. The older man looked at Clemont as if he was telling the world's biggest tall tale, before a small smile crossed his mouth. "This is... the first time I heard of such a thing."

"Oh?"

"I guess I spend way too much time locked inside my lab on East Tandar. I need..." he briefly glanced at his two assistants, who shifted on their feet. "... to pay more attention to what happens on the bigger side of the region."

"I'm sure it will be on the news pretty soon," Clemont said, as he felt a bead of sweat running down his neck.

For some reason, Clemont felt a little uncomfortable with the way Larkspur had reacted to that piece of information.

"Then again, I'm sure they won't keep you there forever. Once your work on the power plant is done, please come to my laboratory. It's next to Silverport Town," Larkspur said. "Now, I've seen quite a lot of your work. Would you like to hear about the work my people and I do?"

"Of course! I'm always eager to learn," Clemont nodded.

"Eh, I think I'm going for a walk," Bonnie said in mild disgust, as she got up from the table. "The nerd talk is going to get even thicker."

"Looks like the professor and you have a lot to talk about, so I think I'm going out too," Serena said, also getting up. "I should find a place to do some training for the contest. Ash, would you like to come and help me train?"

"Sure!" Ash said, also getting up.

"Be sure to return in time! The presentation begins in two and a half hours!" Clemont reminded his friends and his sister as they left the

Pokemon Center.

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Half an hour later, Ash and Serena were on the edge between Rochfale Town and Route 6, towards the west of the town. While its terrain was uneven, rocky and steep, given its proximity to the mountain chain that cut through West Tandor, it was the best place to train they found until then.

The two trainers were currently in a double battle in order to keep helping Serena hone her abilities in such a match. Serena felt her victory against Aisha was too narrow, and wanted her next one to be less dependent on luck.

"Minicorn, Fairy Wind! Form a tornado!" Serena called.

Minicorn neighed, her horn glowing with a pink hue as sparkly winds gathered in front of her, forming a tornado that moved towards Ash's Pokemon, Aveden and Colarva.

"Now, Pancham, Dark Pulse into the Fairy Wind!" Serena added.

"Paaaan... !" Pancham cupped his paws together, before thrusting them forward, releasing a black and purple stream of swirling energy at Minicorn's attack.

Both attacks combined into an impressive pink, black and purple tornado with pink and purple sparkles.

"Let's fight wind with wind! Aveden, Gust! Colarva, Powder Snow into the Gust!" Ash commanded.

"Ave!"

"Co!"

Aveden cawed, as he began to flap his wings as fast as possible, forming a tornado of similar size to the one formed by Minicorn, while

Colarva blew a gust of chilly wind with small bits of snow on it into Aveden's attack, increasing its size. The two attacks clashed in the middle, producing an explosion of pink and purple light, as well as bits of ice and snow.

"Come on Ash, do you really need to copy my combo to counter it?" Serena playfully asked. "I know you're more creative than that!"

Ash's mouth curved into a smirk at the prospect of the challenge Serena was throwing at his feet. A prospect that wouldn't go unanswered.

"In that case, how about this original maneuver! Aveden, grab Colarva and fly into the sky!" Ash commanded.

"Den!" Aveden cawed, as he swooped towards Colarva, and caught him between his talons.

"LAAAAAAAR!?" the Snow Mite Pokemon cried in shock, as Aveden carried him away from the ground.

"Don't worry Colarva, Aveden won't let you fall down!" Ash assured the scared bug type. "Now, time for an aerial bombardment! Colarva, Signal Beam! Aveden, Mirror Shot!"

Fortunately for Ash, Colarva managed to regain his bearings and snap out of the shock just in time to hear his order, as the Snow Mite Pokemon began to fire a rainbow colored energy beam at the two Pokemon below him, while Aveden fired from his beak a greenish silvery beam of light towards them.

"Dodge it, quickly!" Serena said, urging her Pokemon not to stay still. "Pancham, stop them with Stone Edge!"

Pancham dodged a Signal Beam with a graceful cartwheel, and as soon as he landed, he slammed both paws into the ground, summoning a row of large stone pillars towards the airborne Pokemon. Unfortunately, even with a passenger, Aveden was as

swift as ever, and managed to skillfully dodge the stone pillars by flying in a zigzag pattern around them. Colarva then fired another Signal Beam, which hit Pancham squarely in the chest.

"Pancham!" Serena cried as she began to scan the battleground, wracking her brain to come up with a countermeasure as fast as it could. Serena watched how Minicorn tried to take down the aerial duo with Charge Beam unprompted, but once again Aveden skillfully dodged the yellow electric beam before firing another Mirror Shot, though he looked a bit tired by the extra effort of fighting while carrying Colarva. Then, an idea hit Serena. "Micorn, Pancham, run towards each other! Stay together!"

"Aveden, Colarva, watch out and keep your distance!" Ash warned his Pokemon. "Keep attacking, but get ready for whatever Serena's planning!"

Serena's two Pokemon continued to avoid the attacks, running towards each other as fast as they could until they closed the distance between them. Aveden and Colarva saw this as an opportunity to take the two Pokemon at once, and fired a Mirror Shot and a Signal Beam.

"Now! Pancham, counter those attacks with Dark Pulse! Minicorn, use Charge Beam!"

With a cry of affirmation, Serena's two Pokemon fired their attacks, which met the rainbow beam and the silvery green energy stream in the middle. Both pairs of attacks struggled against each other, before the Dark Pulse and the Charge Beam began to push through the attacks of Ash's Pokemon, until they reached their targets. Aveden and Colarva were engulfed by the resulting explosion of electricity and dark power, the two of them falling to the ground.

"Aveden! Colarva!" Ash cried in worry.

While Colarva fell to the ground on his carapace, Aveden was able to break his fall by righting his body mid air and quickly flapping his

wings.

"Nice counter. Aveden could dodge your attacks while flying, but not if you used them to directly counter my Pokemon's moves," Ash praised Serena, while realizing her tactic. He then looked at his Pokemon, Aveden still in the air, and Colarva with enough energy to barely get back to his feet. "While Aveden can keep fighting, I think that was a bit too much for Colarva. Should we end the spar here?"

"Sure, I don't mind," Serena said, before walking towards Pancham and Minicorn. "Great work there, you two! If you keep fighting like that, we'll win our third ribbon in no time!"

"Pan, chanpan!" Pancham said, puffing his chest with pride.

Minicorn neighed cutely and stomped one of her hooves once.

"Let's take a little break before moving onto something else," Ash said, as he sat on a nearby rock. He patted the spot next to him, motioning Serena to sit down. "You're doing so good, Serena. You already have that ribbon in the bag."

"I have a great mentor," Serena giggled, as she sat beside him. "Maybe I should have trained alongside you in Kalos as well. Maybe I could have honed my skills much faster."

"Eh, I don't think I would have been of much help. Showcases are too different from battles," Ash said, scratching his temple. "Contest, on the other hand... plus, I have experience mentoring fledging coordinators."

"Yes. May and Dawn, right?" Serena said, rubbing her arm a little.

Ash nodded. "Sometimes I wonder what are they up to. Not just them, but pretty much every friend I traveled with."

"You miss them, huh?" Serena asked.

"Well... yes and no," Ash replied, sounding a little confused. "As in, sure, I always remember the good times we had together, and it'd be great if we got to see each other again, but I'm somebody who likes to look towards the future rather than the past, you know?"

Serena nodded. *"The past... that's what I could become... that's what I could have become if it wasn't for Delia's invitation to Pallet Town,"* she began, deep in thought. *"No one said that I would never see Ash ever again, but by the time we met each other again... maybe things would have changed and I would lose my chance to confess my feelings... what if when I meet him again, Ash already has a girlfriend? No, I need to be more decisive, I spent all of Kalos-"*

"Serena, are you okay?" Ash asked, snapped the honey blonde out of her thoughts.

"Uh? What? Eh... uh, yes!" Serena stammered.

"You sure? You're getting a little red," Ash pointed out. "We can go back to the Pokemon Center if you aren't feeling well..."

"No, no! It's nothing! I'm feeling just fine!" Serena insisted, waving her hands in front of her, sounding a little more forceful than she wished to.

"If you say so..." Ash replied, and Serena inwardly thanked him for not wanting to press the issue.

There was a moment of silence, as Serena regained her bearings and put her thoughts in order. She took a deep but hopefully silent breath in order to calm herself and suppress her blushing. She was going to ask something important, and she needed to be as serene as possible.

Serene, heh.

"Say, Ash..." Serena broke the silence. "You have traveled with quite a few girls already..."

"Yes...?" Ash replied, raising an eyebrow.

"Do you think... there could have been something between you and either of them?" Serena asked. She swallowed in order to suppress a lump in her throat, before asking her next question. "You know, something more than... more than friendship?"

"More than... friendship?" Ash repeated, sounding obfuscated.

"You know, like, a relationship. Boyfriend and girlfriend," Serena basically had to force those words out of her mouth, and averted Ash's gaze so the Pallet Town native couldn't see how she was seconds away from combusting.

"Huh..." Ash stuttered. Serena dared to look at him, and much to her surprise, there was a little bit of red between his eyes. "Um... I don't think so?"

"Really? Don't you think some of those girls might have feelings for you?" Serena pressed.

"Well, I'm not sure. But I don't think so," Ash replied. "If that was the case, they would have said something. At least before we parted ways."

Somehow, Serena's face lost all her color while simultaneously continuing to blush. " *Good grief, I might not even be the first one. It might be just me, but there's no way somebody like Ash had met so many people, so many girls, and none of them fell for him. I really need to step up my game and make my feelings known to him...* "

"Serena? Are you sure you're okay?" Ash asked, placing a hand on her shoulder, startling her a little. "You're zoning out a lot."

"Yes, yes! I'm fine!" Serena almost shouted. She took another deep breath to calm down. Okay, time to throw subtlety to the wind. Maybe not a full confession but something to pave the way for one. "Say, if

one of those girls said they liked you and wanted you to be more than just friends with them... would you say yes?"

The red on Ash face spread a little further. This time, it was him who averted Serena's gaze.

"Eh... uh... um... I'm not sure..." Ash weakly replied. He rubbed the back of his neck. "It's not something I give a lot of thought to, you know? I don't tend to dwell on what ifs. Why are you asking me this, Serena?"

"Oh, nothing in particular!" Serena tried really hard to sound nonchalant. "You know, I thought it was an interesting conversation topic to have while we rested. But if I'm making you feel uncomfortable, I'll stop right now!"

"Oh, no, don't worry, you're not making me feel uncomfortable or anything," Ash reassured. "It's just... like I said, it's not something I tend to think too much about."

"Well, that's good to hear it," Serena said, before sitting up, ready to put an end to the conversation before it could get more awkward. "I think I'm going to see how Selkid and Chicoatl are doing."

And she left before Ash had any chance to say anything.

...

Greninja was standing vigilant over all of Ash and Serena's Pokemon, who were training either on their own, or under their respective trainer's supervision. As one of Ash's strongest Pokemon, it was his duty to watch over his less experienced teammates, at least when Ash wasn't training him.

Closest to him were Pikachu and Orchynx. The former was trying to show the latter a move she could learn, though the Kitten Pokemon seemed to be more interested in licking herself clean than in listening to anything Pikachu had to say.

"Pi, pika, pikapi!" Pikachu explained Orchynx, waving his arms for added emphasis.

"Or?" Orchynx asked after stopping licking her front legs, tilting her head a little.

"Pîka!" Pikachu said, pointing to a nearby boulder. He then jumped into the air as his tail began to glow with a silvery light, before striking the boulder with a powerful Iron Tail, blowing a good chunk of it. "Pi, pikachupi!"

This demonstration seemed to spark Orchynx's interest, who quickly jumped to her four legs.

"Orch!" Orchynx nodded, as she began to concentrate. Her tail stood on end, growing stiff, as it began to intermittently flash with the same silvery light as Pikachu's tail did, trying her best to emulate the move.

"Pi, chupi!" Pikachu cheered.

Greninja was also going to cheer for the Grass-type, when all of sudden his instincts practically screamed at him of danger. Someone was close, watching them. Someone who didn't bear good intentions towards them. Someone *very* powerful.

"Gre!?" Greninja turned around just to see a flash of green disappear behind a large rocky formation. "NINJA!"

"Pika?" Pikachu asked.

Greninja immediately leaped towards said rock formation, Night Slash ready to strike, but found nothing. The Ninja Pokemon frantically looked around in search for the stalker, but found nothing.

"Greninja?" Ash asked, running towards him. "Is everything alright?"

The dark energy sword in his hand dispelled into nothingness, and he shook his head. "Gren."

"False alarm?" Ash guessed, before he smiled sympathetically. "It's okay. Don't worry, I doubt there's going to be a repeat of what happened with those Pokemon thieves."

Greninja, however, had the feeling that what had been stalking them was much worse than a mere thief.

...

A couple hours later, Professor Cypress' Laboratory

"No offense Professor Bamb'o, but compared to this laboratory, yours feels like that of a middle school," Vitor commented, as he looked around.

While a bit insensitive, Vitor's comment wasn't unwarranted. The entrance had automatic sliding doors, the walls and floor were in pristine condition, everything was arranged in a meticulously tidy way, from the smallest tool to the largest machine. Not to mention how much bigger it was. As Professor Bamb'o led the group through the laboratory, the group could see many scientists working and testing a multitude of gadgets on different Pokemon.

All in all, the place had a much more professional feel. The only one who didn't seem impressed was Professor Larkspur, whose face remained stony.

"Eh, no offense taken. Lily always was the smarter of the two. Between the fact that she graduated earlier than me and all the breakthroughs she made in her field since then, getting funding for her projects must have been a piece of cake," Bamb'o said good naturedly.

"I'm sure you'll also get to her level soon," Clemont reassured. "From what I have seen, your work is also pretty impressive."

Bamb'o smiled as they entered a room with some scientists talking to each other. "Thanks, kid. Let's hope you're right and- oh look,

there she is! Hey, Lily!"

The group saw a woman of the same age as Bamb'o talking with two other scientists, who appeared to be undergraduates. Upon hearing Bamb'o, the woman dismissed the undergrads, and walked towards Bamb'o, beaming in joy. She had green hair neatly tied in a ponytail that fell down her back, and eyes of the same color behind oval shaped glasses. She was wearing an unbuttoned lab coat on top of a light blue shirt with a green tie, a navy blue knee length skirt, and flat black shoes.

"Ernest! I'm so glad you could make it!" Professor Cypress said, welcoming Bamb'o with a hug, which the shades-wearing man returned.

"Of course, Lily. I wouldn't miss your big moment for anything in the world!" he reassured her.

"Ernest? Lily? Ohhhhhhh, look at that, Serena, they call each other by their *first names*!" Bonnie whispered to the honey blonde while nudging her. A sly grin formed on her face. "And that hug! That's not very *professional* behavior, is it?"

Serena couldn't help but giggle and nod in agreement.

"Professor Larkspur. It's an honor to have you here as well," she said to the other Pokemon Professor. Her tone was cordial but much less warm. She extended her hand, which the man accepted and shook.

"I'm sure that whatever you have prepared for us, you won't fail to impress," Larkspur said, smiling at her.

"Yeah, if only Professor Oak was here. I called him and asked him to come, but the old guy said he was busy," Bamb'o said, letting out a dismissive snort.

"It's okay, Ernest. I already have the confirmation that another Kantonian Professor, Cerise, is planning to attend with his family,"

Cypress told him.

Professor Cerise? Ash didn't know there were more Pokemon Professors in Kanto besides Oak. The more you know.

Lastly, Cypress took a look at the entourage of teens that accompanied the professors.

"Oh my, you told me you were going to get a couple interns for field research, but I wasn't expecting you'd hire so many," Cypress said, adjusting her glasses.

"Only these two are my interns," Bamb'o said, motioning towards the Moki twins. "The others are trainers that are here on behalf of Professors Oak and Sycamore."

"I see. I hope you enjoy the presentation of my latest project. Why don't you head to the auditorium and choose your seats?" Professor Cypress suggested. "The presentation will begin shortly, and I'd love to see all of you on the first row."

"This place has an auditorium too?" Natalie said, amazed. "Professor Bamb'o, you need to do a lot of catching up with your lab."

"No need to remind me. Come on people, you heard her! Let's get to the auditorium!" Bamb'o said, as he lead the group towards the aforementioned place.

...

It was a good thing that they reached the auditorium as soon as they did, because only a few minutes after occupying most of the front row seats, more people began to pour in, some reporters, others scientists, and others that were neither. In no time, most of the seats were already filled. A few minutes later, Professor Cypress walked towards the atrium.

"Ladies and gentlemen. Fellow members of the scientific community, and members of the press," Cypress began talking as if she had addressed a crowd a thousand times. "Welcome to the presentation of my newest invention, one that will revolutionize the way humans and Pokemon interact."

This seemed to catch the attention of everybody involved, especially Ash, who shot Pikachu a meaningful look.

"Humans and Pokemon have coexisted since time immemorial, and lived in harmony with one another. But alas, no matter how deep our bonds with our Pokemon are, there has always been a barrier that stopped us from taking our relationship to its fullest potential, and that's the way Pokemon communicate.

"For those who don't know, I specialize in researching Pokemon language and speech patterns, and what we can do to understand them the way Pokemon can understand us. That has always been my dream, which had pushed the work of my life," she began, before growing visibly excited. "And now I can safely say that said dream has become a reality! Ladies and gentlemen, it's a pleasure to unveil before you the very first functional prototype of the Pokemon Speech Translator, or PST!"

As she made the announcement, one of her scientists walked towards the atrium, holding what appeared to be some sort of rectangular blue and yellow device with a microphone linked to it via plastic cord. It looked like a toy cassette recorder.

"Now, forgive the somewhat crude design, but like I said, it's only a prototype. Once we polish all the kinks, we will focus on making a more easy to use design," Professor Cypress said, holding the PST for everybody to see.

"Excuse me, are we supposed to believe that that gadget is able to translate what Pokemon say?" a reporter asked.

"Perhaps a demonstration is in order?" Professor Cypress said, as she scanned the crowd with her eyes, before they set on Ash. "You, the boy with the Pikachu. Would you be so kind as to get up here?"

"Uh? Eh... sure!" Ash said, as he walked towards the atrium as well.

Once he was next to Professor Cypress, she pressed a switch on the PST, seemingly turning it on, before bringing the microphone closer to Pikachu. "Now, say something."

"Pikapi?" Pikachu asked, before it was followed by an artificial voice from the PST: [What I'm supposed to say?]

There was a wave of gasps from the crowd.

"Pika?" [That was me?] Pikachu asked in shock. "Pi, pika, pikapi!" Look Ash! I'm talking in your language!

"WHOA! This is so cool!" Ash almost shouted, excitement overflowing through his very being. "And does it work with any Pokemon?"

"While we still need to do more tests, so far it has worked with every Pokemon we tried it on," Cypress confidently replied. "Do you have any other Pokemon you'd like to hear talk?"

"Sure!" Ash said, as he pulled out a pokeball. "Aveden, I choose you!"

The Bliss Bird Pokemon emerged from his pokeball, flapping his wings in mid air, as he looked around, a little confused. Cypress brought the microphone next to him.

"Come on Aveden, say something," Ash told his first Tandorian Pokemon. "Tell them about yourself."

"Av, den, ave, aveden!" Aveden cawed. [Hello, my name is Aveden. I love to sing and to fight to get stronger. But above everything else, I love my trainer Ash.]

There was a wave of "awwwws" at Aveden's earnest introduction.

"Can I use another Pokemon?" Ash asked, another pokeball already in hand. "There's a Pokemon I have that can be kind of difficult, and understanding what he says would help immensely."

"Of course. That's why I called you here," Cypress amiably said.

"In that case, Dunsparce, I choose you!" Ash said, releasing the Land Snake Pokemon from the capture device. Cypress crouched down and brought the microphone close to Dunsparce. "Come on Dunsparce, say something!"

"Duns," Dunsparce said.

BLEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP!

The air excitement in the room immediately vanished, replaced by an extremely uncomfortable silence. People began to murmur if Cypress' invention was as good as she claimed to be. The green haired woman certainly looked a bit upset.

"Uh... Professor Cypress?" Ash asked. "Did the PST fail?"

"Actually no, it didn't fail. It works as intended," Cypress said in a neutral tone.

"But-"

"You see, the PST also has a built-in censor in order to block swears, curses and vulgarities in general," Cypress said. "What we heard was the censor in action."

"Ah..." Ash dumbly said, before the implications of Cypress' words finally sunk, and angrily turned towards the Land Snake Pokemon. "Dunsparce! That was uncalled for! Apologize right now!"

"Parce," Dunsparce said.

BLEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP!

"Dunsparce!" Ash shouted, before sighing, and recalling him back to his pokeball. "You're impossible. Return," he then looked at Cypress with an abashed look. "I'm very sorry for Dunsparce."

"No wonder you said he was a little difficult," Cypress said, chuckling awkwardly. She then cleared her throat before addressing the public again. "Sorry for that little incident. At least we know the censor works, hehe. So, does anybody else want to test the PST with their Pokemon?"

Needless to say, Cypress got no shortage of volunteers. The green haired scientist choose a girl with long maroon hair tied on a long braid, which was holding a female Eevee. Said girl introduced herself as Chloe Cerise, and Ash guessed she was Professor Cerise's daughter.

"Ev! Evui!" her Eevee cried. [Look Chloe! I'm talking like you!]

"Oh wow! This is... I never thought I could understand Eevee!" Chloe said in awe.

"Vui, ev, evui!" Eevee said. [I know! I'll copy that machine's ability so I can talk with you all the time!]

That elicited a wave of laughs and "awwwws" in equal measure, before Chloe returned to her seat and Cypress chose another volunteer.

...

Several hours later, the demonstration had already reached its end, as everybody got up from their seats and began to slowly vacate the auditorium. The event would have ended much earlier, but everybody had a Pokemon in hand and they didn't want to miss the chance to hear them speak in a language they could understand.

(Bonnie was rather disappointed that, when it was her turn, Dedenne had fallen asleep. And when he woke up after much prodding, all he said was that he was hungry).

When the group left the laboratory, the sun was almost completely gone, so they decided to head back to the Pokemon Center and have some dinner, before turning in for the night.

And an hour after the last person had vacated the laboratory, a figure clad in green, using the cover of the night, got close to Professor Cypress' workplace. The figure narrowed its eyes in anger, clenched its fist, and sneaked into the building.

Author's Note: After several chapters with intense fights, I think we needed a calmer chapter with no fights, don't you think? Well, technically, there was a fight, but it was a friendly spar between Ash and Serena, but those don't count.

Speaking of our power couple, we finally get another step in their direction. You see, Ash is very dense, so before she can make a move, Serena needs to plant the idea of romantic love in Ash's head, to pave the ground for her eventual confession. And trust me, said confession will come sooner than most of you expect ;)

Given that we spent a few chapters with Theo, it was only fair that Vitor and Natalie had their turn in the spotlight as well! Especially Natalie, since she has been absent since Passage Cave. And yeah, as you can imagine, Vitor will compete against Serena again the contest to come.

For those who haven't played the game, yes, the Pokemon Speech Translator, or PST, it's an actual item in the game that can be used to understand what Pokemon are saying. Sadly, it's tragically underutilized, only seeing use on a few cutscenes. But rest assured that it won't be the case here.

And if you played the game, you should know who that green clad figure who sneaked inside the laboratory is, which yes, it's what Greninja sensed before (and no, it's not Team Omega, since Team Omega doesn't exist in the game). If you haven't played the game... sorry, but you'll have to wait for the next chapter to find out ;D

And look at that, with Larkspur, we have the third East Tandorian that makes an appearance much earlier than in the game! I bet you weren't expecting him to show up this early. Well, that's because I plan to give him a much greater role than in the actual game, so I need to introduce him now.

Also, speaking of unexpected cameos, there's Chloe. Given that I had featured Goh in a previous chapter, I felt that Chloe was due a little appearance as well, and felt that Cypress' announcement was a good place for that, given that Chloe's dad is a Pokemon Professor.

Thanks a lot to cricketlaxwolvesbandy, Fox McCloud, 61394, hirowriter, DryBonesKing and Viroro-kun for reviewing last chapter, and special thanks to Viroro-kun for his super job beta-reading this chapter and all the suggestions he made to improve it.

See you next chapter, and make sure to leave a review with your thoughts on this chapter! If you review, you'll make me happy and more eager to write!

A Clash of Wills: The Ninja vs The Hero

Chapter 20:

A Clash of Wills: The Ninja Vs the Hero

Rochfale Town

The very next morning, everybody was having breakfast at the Pokemon Center: Ash, Serena, Bonnie and Clemont on one table, and Professor Bamb'o, Vitor, Natalie, Alain and Mairin on the other.

Professor Bamb'o told them that Larkspur and his assistants already had breakfast, and left for Professor Cypress' laboratory to discuss something.

"Hey, Ash!" Alain raised his voice so Ash could hear him from his table. "Mairin and I plan to leave at noon. How about before we leave Rochfale, we have that rematch we couldn't have in Comet Port?"

"I'd love to, but I promised Serena that I'd help her train for her contest, which is tomorrow," Ash said, somewhat apologetically.

"It's okay, Ash, you can have that match against Alain if you want," Serena told him.

"Really?" Ash excitedly asked. He really enjoyed his previous match against the black-haired teen, and he was craving for more. "But what about-"

"I don't think it will take you so long that you won't be able to help me train later," Serena told him, before smiling softly. "Besides, I can see in your eyes that you're dying to battle Alain again."

"Thank you Serena! You're the best!" He beamed at her.

She giggled in return. "Well, I try."

Before the conversation could go any further, the doors of the Pokemon Center's cafeteria swung open, revealing a very shaken Professor Cypress, her agitated face betraying the bad news she was about to deliver before she could open her mouth. Walking behind her at a noticeably calmer pace were Professor Larkspur and his assistants.

"Ernest! Ernest!" Cypress practically yelled as she ran towards her fellow Professor, who, obviously sensing that there was something very wrong, quickly got up and gently grabbed the green haired woman by the shoulders.

"Breathe, Lily, breathe," Bamb'o said, the usual joviality of his voice gone, replaced by steely sobriety. "Now tell me what happened."

"T-The lab! Somebody broke into the lab last night and robbed us!" Lily exclaimed.

"What!?" many people shouted at once.

"Of course. The Pokemon Speech Translator would be something a lot of thieves would want to get their hands into," Clemont said.

"Actually, that's the weirdest part..." Cypress began, slowly regaining her bearings. "The PST hasn't been stolen. Neither were any of our other completed projects. The thief released all the Pokemon from the lab and took them away."

"So, your usual Pokemon thieves," Bonnie said, crossing her arms.

"Not as usual as you may think. You better come with me and watch the security footage," Cypress told them.

...

Professor Cypress' Lab

Ten minutes later, everybody was back in the lab. They were led to a room with multiple screens, which they assumed was a security room. A technician was playing a security video of the previous night. At first nothing happened, but then, at the 2:43 AM mark, something blew up a window, littering the ground with glass shards and pieces of wood and metal. Then, something or someone entered the building.

"Naturally, the first thing I did was call the Rangers, but they've been busy busting a Team Omega operation, so they'll take some time to come," Cypress explained.

"I'm afraid the video isn't very good," the technician sitting on the control panel said. "Cameras use night vision, so it won't be as good as a recording during the day."

"Huh?" Bonnie narrowed her eyes, and got closer to the screen. "Is that guy wearing a cape?"

The video changed to a hallway just as the intruder blitzed past it. Then to another, and another. They could see that the intruder was wearing what appeared to be some sort of jumpsuit, had their head covered under a paper bag, and they were wearing a cape that billowed as they moved. All in all, it looked like somebody wearing a cheap superhero costume.

"Well, that definitely rules Team Omega out," Clemont observed. "Their uniforms look nothing like that."

Then, the camera changed to the laboratory's holding pens, where all the Pokemon slept, and much to their shock, the intruder opened the steel door with a kick so powerful, they tore it from its hinges.

"WHOA! His costume might be cheap, but those kicks definitely aren't!" Natalie said, her eyes wide open in shock.

Then, the intruder began to pry open every door from the holding pens, letting the Pokemon out. Once he was done, he herded every

Pokemon and led them out of the lab.

"Well, he does have the strength of many superheroes," Ash commented.

"Have you guys noticed that the intruder doesn't try to capture the Pokemon with either cages or pokeball? He almost expects them to follow him out of the lab," Bamb'o noted.

"Perhaps an activist who thinks that they're doing the Pokemon a favor by setting them free," Serena offered. "It doesn't explain the super strength, though."

"If that's the case, then the Pokemon can't be too far," Alain pointed out. "In fact, some of them might even try to get back to the lab."

At that moment, the door of the security room slid open, and one of Cypress' junior scientists entered.

"Professor Cypress! We found one of the stolen Pokemon!" the scientist said. "Apparently, it managed to evade the kidnapper and returned to us. It was found around the westernmost edge of the town."

"Told you so," Alain said, though he wasn't taking any sort of pleasure at being proved right. "Western part of the town, huh? That's where the thief must have gone."

"What's to the west of Rochfale Town?" Mairin asked.

"Nothing. At least nothing in close proximity. The closest town is more than fifty kilometers away," Bamb'o replied.

"It doesn't matter, the fact that we recovered one of our Pokemon gives us a huge lead to find the rest," Cypress said, her hopes renewed. "Ask about what happened with the PST!"

"We're already doing it, professor. Debbie is interrogating it as we speak," the scientist replied.

"Lead us to them," Cypress instructed.

A couple minutes later, the junior scientist led the group towards one of the smaller labs. There, a scientist with short blond hair -they deduced it was Debbie- was talking with a Pokemon they never saw before, one that looked like a small purple bat with huge ears, green eyes, and its wings wrapped around its body as if it was a cloak. Ash and Serena took out their Pokedex in order to scan this new Pokemon.

"Minyan, the Mischief Pokemon. Dark/Poison. Called the 'tiny master of evil', it tries to cause discord but often ends up messing up and fleeing in embarrassment."

While the picture of Minyan displayed by the Pokedex had a malevolent expression, the real one being interrogated couldn't look any different; rather than evil or scheming, it looked scared and on edge.

"Ah, professor Cypress," Debbie said, getting up and walking towards her boss. "I just finished interrogating Minyan. It says that the thief was taking them to the south when it escaped."

"To the south?" Cypress repeated. "But... there's nothing to the south but a chain of mountains..."

"Well, if you think about it, it's a good place for a hideout," Clemont pointed out. "Remember that Team Omega base we helped bust out?"

"Yeah, it was built under a small mountain," Serena recalled.

"Guess that makes sense," Cypress said, before turning towards Ash and his friends. "You said you have experience in these kind of situations, don't you? In that case, help us find the thief's hideout and rescue our Pokemon."

Before Ash could reply, Debbie interrupted him.

"That wasn't all Minyan told me, professor," Debbie gravely said. "This might sound nonsensical, but Minyan claims the thief wasn't human."

"What?" Cypress asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, that would explain the strength," Clemont said, crossing his arms in deep thought. "But it looked human. Could it be a Pokemon?"

"Human or not, what that thief did with our Pokemon is unforgivable," Cypress energetically stated. "Everybody, let's go! We have several Pokemon to rescue!"

...

Route 6

Half an hour later, a group consisting of Ash, Serena, Clemont, Bonnie, Alain, Mairin, the Moki twins, the three professors and Larkspur's assistants were following Professor Cypress through Route 6, also known as Pahar Hills. Professor Cypress was leading the group, taking them through a rocky path among several short hills that led to the south.

"Really? Alright, those are good news," Cypress said, as she tapped the earpiece she was wearing. She then turned towards the rest of the group. "One of my employees is studying a map of the area, and found that there's a cave not far away from here."

"The thief must be taking shelter there," Ash replied.

"Would the thief use such an obvious hideout?" Vitor questioned.

"No, but this area doesn't have much in terms of shelter. So it's either that cave, or somewhere else we aren't aware of," Bamb'o replied.

"Let's hope it's the former."

No one contested the decision. The group continued walking for about fifteen minutes. From time to time, they would see some Pokemon looking at them hidden behind a rock, only for them to quickly scurry around when they were noticed.

"There's so much silence," Bonnie whispered, hugging herself. "I don't like it."

"If the thief is really hiding nearby, they might hear us coming and escape," Serena pointed out.

"If that's the case, then we'll hear them running away, and intercept them," Alain replied, as he started to look around. Wherever he looked, there were many steep slopes and large rocks scattered everywhere. "This terrain isn't really good for chases, and we have Flying-type Pokemon."

"There it is," Cypress said, pointing forward.

And indeed, after taking a turn, they could see the entrance of a fairly large cave. The group stopped, not sure of what to do. Everybody seemed to be on the same wavelength: entering there without knowing what was inside could have fatal results.

"I think it's my turn. Luxray, come out!" Clemont said, tossing a pokeball forward.

The capture device hit the ground and opened, releasing the Lumiose Gym Leader's strongest Pokemon, looking as stoic and ready to fight as ever.

"Luxray!" he cried.

"Luxray, see the cave in front of us?" Clemont asked. "We believe it might be used by a Pokemon thief as a shelter. Can you scan it and tell us if there are any Pokemon inside? Not just one or two, but many."

"Lux, luxray!" Luxray cried in agreement.

"Good idea, Clemont," Cypress said, as she walked towards him with the Pokemon Speech Translator in hand. "And with the PST, he'll be able to give us a detailed account of what he can see inside."

Luxray then took a couple steps towards the cave, and fixed his eyes on the entrance, which quickly gained a glowing red hue. The Gleam Eyes Pokemon focused his sight on the cave, and after a few seconds, he gave his verdict: "Lux, luxray, lux!"

"Did you see something?" Clemont asked, and Luxray nodded. Cypress moved the microphone of the PST close to his face. "Luxray, tell us exactly what you see."

"Lux, ray, luxray, lux," he began.

[There are many Pokemon in that cave. I have counted fourteen. Thirteen of them are huddled together against a wall. They appear to be scared. Another one is pacing back and forth in the cave.]

"We have fourteen Pokemon in our lab. If we subtract Minyan, and add the kidnapper, who appears to be a Pokemon... the numbers fit," Cypress said.

"Then what are we waiting for? Let's go and rescue those Pokemon!" Bonnie stated

But Luxray wasn't done. "Lux, luxray!" he said, sounding almost like a warning.

[Clemont, my instincts are warning me of a great danger inside that cave. I shall fight if you ask me, but I don't think I'll be able to match the foe waiting inside that cave.]

"Oh..." Clemont said in disappointment, as a sense of uneasiness settled in. They knew the thief was strong from what they saw in the

security videos, but to make Luxray this upset? "Then... what are we going to do? We can't just abandon those Pokemon..."

"We won't," Alain said, taking a step forward. He then turned towards Ash. "Ash and I are the strongest trainers in this group. We'll head first and face the thief. Between his Greninja and my Mega Charizard X, it should be more than enough to deal with them."

"I think that's the best plan," Ash agreed, before looking at the rest of the group. "Everyone, try to keep some distance. Maybe you could try to rescue the kidnapped Pokemon while Alain and I fight the thief."

"Sounds like a good plan. If you can keep the thief away from the Pokemon, we can use that window of opportunity to take them back," Cypress said.

And thus, with their strongest Pokemon's respective pokeballs at the ready (and Pikachu still perched on Ash's shoulder) the Kalos league finalists ventured into the cave. It was a little dark at first, but they could see some light in the chamber at the end of the entrance tunnel. Natural light. It seemed that the cave had some holes that allowed sunlight to enter.

"Gar! Garli!"

And before them, angrily pacing around the chamber, was the Pokemon thief. Which, now that they could see him much better, was clearly an actual Pokemon. It had a humanoid shape, its body mostly green. Its head was brown, and shaped like a garlic. A cape of the same color fell down its back all the way to the floor.

Despite its somewhat silly appearance and small stature that reached Bonnie's height both Ash and Alain knew better than to underestimate that Pokemon by its appearance.

"Gar?" it asked, noticing the intruders. It immediately turned towards them, piercing them with a fierce glare, freezing them in place.

"Garliki, gar, kid!"

"Ash. Prepare to fight," Alain cautioned. "This Pokemon doesn't appear to be very willing to reach an understanding with us."

Ash pulled his Pokedex with his free hand. "Let's see if the Pokedex can give us some information about it."

" Garlikid, the Hero Pokemon. Grass/Fighting. This Legendary Pokemon believes itself to be a savior of all Pokémonkind. It will pick fights with anyone it considers villainous," the Pokedex said.

"Legendary?" Bonnie's voice said from behind. "That little green guy is as strong as Squishy?"

"Squishy?" Natalie asked, looking at Bonnie a little confused.

"We'll explain you later," Serena quickly told her.

"A Garlikid. Of course. I can't believe I didn't recognize it when I saw it on the camera," Professor Cypress replied. "That Garlikid must have thought that our Pokemon were being held prisoner and decided to liberate them."

"Perhaps it mistook you and your people for those Team Omega thugs," Bamb'o supplied.

Hearing Cypress and Bamb'o, Ash thought that maybe the chance of solving this peacefully wasn't gone yet. He held his hands defensively -even if he kept Greninja's pokeball between his fingers- and made his case:

"Listen Garlikid, this was just a misunderstanding. Professor Cypress is a good person who treats her Pokemon kindly," Ash began, as he took a tentative step towards the angry Garlikid. He then nodded towards the Pokemon huddled together at the other side of the chamber. "Look, those Pokemon are scared and want to go back

home. Why don't you let them leave, and we forget that this ever happened?"

Garlikid's response came in the form of an Energy Ball at Ash. Thankfully, the boy's reflexes were good enough to jump aside, dodging the attack.

"ASH!" Many people yelled at once.

"Pikapi!" Pikachu jumped in front Ash, cheeks sparking with electricity as he glared at the Legendary Pokemon.

"Stay back! Don't come any closer! This Pokemon is both angry and dangerous. And unless you have Pokemon capable of Mega Evolving, this goes beyond your abilities!" Alain was quick to warn the rest of the group in the back. "Charizard, go!" Alain said, throwing his pokeball forward.

The capture device opened, and the Flame Pokemon emerged from a mass of light, hovering between his trainer and the Hero Pokemon, whom it immediately identified as the enemy.

Ash quickly jumped back to his feet, and tossed his pokeball as well. "Greninja, I choose you!"

The pokeball opened, releasing Ash's currently strongest Pokemon, who appeared next to Charizard, and adopted a fighting stance upon seeing Garlikid.

"Charizard, Dragon Claw!" Alain shouted.

"Greninja, Aerial Ace!" Ash followed.

Flapping his wings to build momentum, Charizard let out a roar as it rocketed towards Garlikid, its right claw covered in green draconic energy. Meanwhile, Greninja dashed forward, trailing closely behind Alain's Pokemon, as his limbs began to glow with a white light.

Naturally, Charizard reached Garlikid first, and delivered a swipe at the Hero Pokemon.

Garlikid, however, quickly proved why it's considered a legendary Pokemon, and at an almost imperceptible speed dodged the Dragon Claw, while sinking his own glowing fist into Charizard's gut, producing a thundering noise and knocking the air out of Alain's Pokemon.

"Charizard!" Alain cried.

It didn't end there. As soon as Greninja was ready to strike, Garlikid grabbed Charizard and used it as a living shield against Greninja's Aerial Ace. The Ninja Pokemon grimaced upon accidentally hitting his ally, making him recoil. And Garlikid took the opportunity to grab Charizard by the tail and slam it against Greninja, sending both Pokemon sprawling backwards in a messy ball of entangled limbs.

"Greninja, no!" Ash cried.

"Charizard, are you okay?" Alain asked in concern.

Thankfully, despite the damage taken, Greninja and Charizard were still in condition to fight. The two of them managed to untangle their limbs from each other, and jump back to their feet, facing once again the angry Garlikid.

"Gar, gar, garlikid!" Garlikid cried, as he angrily pointed at them with his boxing glove-shaped hand.

"Such power..." Ash could hear Larkspur said from behind.

"Charizard and Greninja were barely a match for it."

"That's a Legendary Pokemon to you," Clemont said. "This isn't the first time we have seen such Pokemon in action. That Garlikid will take some serious firepower to bring down."

"Alain, Clemont is right. If we are to win, we need to go all out from the very beginning," Ash told his battle partner. "Or else Garlikid will make mincemeat out of our Pokemon."

Understanding what he meant, Alain nodded, and touched the Keystone on his bracelet. "Charizard, respond to my heart! Surpass evolution! Mega Evolve!"

Beams of light shot from both Alain's Keystone and Charizard's Mega Stone attached to its collar, flying towards each other. Both beams eventually clashed in the middle and merged into a single beam, linking trainer and Pokemon. A bright light washed over Charizard's body as it grew larger and slightly changed its shape. Once the light dimmed out, a black and blue Charizard with blue flames billowing out of its mouth stood in place of the orange one.

"Alright Greninja, our turn!" Ash said, as he crossed his arms in front of his face, ready to trigger the bond that linked them. "Let's show Garlikid how strong we are when we fight together!"

As Ash brought his arms outwards, Greninja was encased by a spiraling column of water. Just like Charizard before him, Greninja began to glow and change his shape, drinking the power the Battle bond supplied him. Once the transformation was complete, the watery cocoon condensed in the form of a four pointed shuriken attached to Greninja's back.

"G-Gar?" Garlikid asked, unconsciously taking a step back. It was obvious it was the first time the Hero Pokemon had seen such transformations. However, his shock wasn't big enough to surrender, as he didn't drop his guard.

"Alain, let's try to pace our attacks so our Pokemon don't end up accidentally hitting each other," Ash advised. "Or give Garlikid the chance to use them as living shields."

"Understood. Let's also attack from different directions as well," Alain said. "Charizard, hover into the air, and use Flamethrower!"

Charizard spread its wings as it jumped into the air, before taking a deep breath and releasing a stream of blue flames towards the caped Pokemon, the fire's intense heat causing ripples in the air. Garlikid didn't move; it merely stomped its foot, generating a row of rising stone pillars. The Stone Edge didn't reach Charizard, but even if the rock columns were left blackened and charred, they did stop the attack.

"Greninja, quick, Aerial Ace!" Ash said.

Greninja blurred past the stone columns, his arms and legs glowing white, and in no time closed the distance between himself and Garlikid, delivering several swipes and kicks towards the Hero Pokemon. Garlikid, however, managed to recover quickly, and began parrying and blocking those hits. He clenched one his fists, which was enveloped in a green swirling aura.

"Greninja, that's Drain Punch! Dodge it!" Ash urged.

The moment the vampiric fist came down, Greninja put some distance with a well-timed backflip. Garlikid didn't cease his attack, and continued to strike, now using the attack with both fists at once.

"Greninja, Double Team!"

"Gre!"

Multiple illusions of Greninja filled the chamber, giving Garlikid pause. Pause that didn't last long, as the Hero Pokemon began to attack the copies, dispelling one and going after another.

"Charizard, Dragon Claw!" Alain said.

Taking advantage of Garlikid's predicament, Charizard dived from above, both claws glowing with green energy. Garlikid managed to avoid the first swipe, but the second found its mark, smacking the Grass and Fighting-type Pokemon in the face.

"Now, Night Slash!" Ash commanded.

Charizard quickly flew upwards, leaving the path clear for Greninja, who was dashing forward, sword of darkness already on his hand. Garlikid was unable to block or dodge in time, falling victim to a vertical upwards slash that reached all the way to its face, knocking the Hero Pokemon backwards.

"Yes! Such a powerful strike!" Bonnie cheered from behind, pumping her fist. "If they keep it up like this, the garlic head will go down in no time!"

But Ash wasn't so optimistic. Especially after he saw a fiery red aura envelop Garlikid, as the Legendary Pokemon slowly rose back to its feet.

"Gar... gar... garli..." it began panting heavily. The red aura flared brightly, as Garlikid's black beady eyes looked like they were on fire, while he flexed his arms with his fists clenched. "GARLIIIIIIIII!"

"What... what's going on?" Serena asked.

"That... that looks like Justified," Professor Cypress said, adjusting her glasses. "When a Pokemon with that ability takes a hit from a Dark-type move, its attacking power soars."

"Are you telling me... Greninja just made it stronger with that attack!?" Bonnie asked in shock, unconsciously holding Dedenne protectively.

"That was a mistake," Serena agreed. "But I'm sure Ash and Alain will be able to beat it anyway."

Back to the battle, Garlikid went on the offensive again, his clenched fist swirling with bits of ice and chilly fog, ready to smash it against Greninja. Without having to be told, the ninja Pokemon jumped backwards just in time to avoid the Ice Punch. The attack slammed

against the ground instead, and a spiky mass of ice exploded outwards, barely missing Greninja.

"Such power... !" Ash said in awe.

Garlikid didn't stop his attack, his other fist glowing with a swirly green aura. This time, Greninja didn't have time to dodge, and the Drain Punch slammed into the ninja frog's gut. Both Greninja and Ash bent forward in pain, as small orbs of green light flowed from Greninja into Garlikid, restoring some of the latter's vitality.

"Ash!" Alain shouted, and quickly checked on his battle partner. He then looked at his Pokemon and shouted: "Charizard, Flamethrower!"

Charizard flapped its wings again to gain altitude, and exhaled another stream of blue flames. Garlikid, meanwhile, cupped its hands together, forming a golden orb with greenish edges, before thrusting its hands towards Charizard, releasing a powerful beam of the same color. The Solar Beam and the Flamethrower clashed, and at first Charizard's attack appeared to push Garlikid's back, but it eventually stopped, and held firm. The two Pokemon ran out of energy to sustain their attacks, which faded into nothingness.

"Ash, are you okay?" Alain asked, helping Ash to stand up.

"Y-yes," he said, a hand still on his belly. Greninja had stopped nursing his gut, and appeared to be once again ready to battle.

"Greninja can still fight!"

"Good, because I don't think Charizard alone can defeat that Pokemon," Alain admitted. "We're fighting together, and that little guy is forcing us onto the defensive."

"In that case, we'll have to make sure the roles are swapped," Ash said.

That moment, Garlikid stomped its foot again, another row of raising stone pillars, taller and thicker than the previous Stone Edge thanks to the Justified boost, rocketed towards Charizard.

"No chance to dodge this time around, but that's far from our only option!" Alain said, throwing a fist forward. "Charizard, cut through that Stone Edge with Steel Wing!"

Charizard roared and spread its wings, which began to glow with a silvery sheen, as it dashed towards the incoming Rock-type move. His gambit worked, and the Steel Wing cut through the Stone Edge like a knife through butter, quickly bridging the distance between them.

"Good! Now Thunder Punch!"

"Greninja, Ice Beam on the ground around Garlikid!" Ash commanded.

As Charizard reared one of its fists back, which crackled with yellow lighting, Garlikid prepared himself to avoid the Mega Evolved Pokemon's onslaught by jumping backwards. While Garlikid avoided the Thunder Punch, Greninja's Ice Beam covered the ground around the Legendary Pokemon in a sheet of ice. The result was that Garlikid slipped and lost its footing, falling on his back in a rather comical way. Charizard then landed forcefully in front of it with a thud.

"Charizard, Flamethrower!" Alain shouted.

Charizard exhaled a stream of blue fire for the third time in the battle, and for the first time, it found its mark. Garlikid screamed as it was engulfed by an inferno of sapphire flames.

"Yes! Well done, Alain!" Ash congratulated his battle partner.

But Ash's cheer was premature, as Garlikid ran out of the mass of blue flames like a green bullet, and smashed an icy fist on

Charizard's face, covering its head in frost and knocking it backwards.

"Charizard!" Alain cried in worry.

Charizard's attack had caused some harm, given that Garlikid was covered with burn marks, and his cape had some holes surrounded by soot. However, he still had enough energy to continue the battle. He formed another Ice Punch as he dashed towards Greninja this time around. However, Ash was prepared this time.

"Greninja, use Water Shuriken as a shield!" Ash shouted.

Greninja nodded, grabbed the shuriken on his back and placed it in front of him a second before the ice covered fist barreled towards his face. The Ice Punch hit the Water Shuriken, not only freezing it instantly, but almost doubling it in size.

"G-Gar!?" Garlikid asked.

"Flamethrower!"

Yet another torrent of azure flames gave Greninja the opening he needed. As Garlikid jumped backwards to avoid being burned for the second time in a row, Greninja threw the frozen shuriken at the Hero Pokemon. The spinning ice star smashed against Garlikid, shattering into a thousand shards that glittered with the sunlight.

"Well done, Greninja!" Ash praised.

"Charizard, Thunder Punch!" Alain commanded.

Still reeling from the frozen shuriken, Garlikid didn't see Charizard coming, its closed fist surrounded by yellow electricity before it slammed into the face of the Hero Pokemon, sending him backwards even further.

"Now Aerial Ace!" Ash said.

"And Dragon Claw!" Alain followed.

Taking advantage of their building momentum, Greninja delivered a series of swipes and kicks with his glowing limbs, before jumping sideways, leaving an open path for Charizard, wings spread and flying in a straight line for Garlikid, claws blazing with green energy. The Dragon Claw slammed into Garlikid's chest, pushing him backwards a couple meters.

"Gaaaaaar..." Garlikid seethed, his eyes obscured by an odd shadow, as his body was once again outlined in a red light.

Alain paled, having seen that move multiple times. "Charizard, get ba-"

"GARLI-LI-LI-LI-LILIIIIIIIIII!" Garlikid screeched as it delivered a flurry of punches so fast, its arms were practically green blurs. It finished with a brutal right hook which send Charizard rocketing towards a nearby wall with such force it caused the entire chamber to quake, pebbles and sand falling from the ceiling.

"Charizard!" Alain cried, seeing his strongest Pokemon dropping to the ground, as the Mega Evolution faded, returning to its normal appearance.

"What... what the hell was that!?" Natalie cried.

"I believe it was a Counter," Bamb'o replied, managing to keep a calm demeanor despite the dire situation. "A move that takes all the power of the last physical move taken and returns it multiplied. And I'm inclined to believe that Counter had the power of both Greninja's Aerial Ace on top of Charizard's Dragon Claw."

Seeing that Charizard was done for, Garlikid directed a hateful glare at Greninja, who didn't flinch and slipped into a fighting stance. Then again, both the amphibian and his trainer knew deep down that their chances of beating the Legendary Pokemon without Charizard's help were close to zero.

Then again, in Ash's book, "close to zero" did not necessarily equal "zero".

"Garlikid! I don't care if you just defeated Alain's Charizard! I don't care if we have to face you on our own! Even if we're alone, we will keep fighting until those Pokemon you took away from Professor Cypress' lab are returned!" Ash hotly declared.

"Gaaaar..." Garlikid hissed, unmoved by Ash's impassioned speech, and took a step forward, ready to finish Greninja off.

Then, suddenly, a blast of ice hit Garlikid in the back of the head. Even if the damage done was minimal, the unexpectedness of the attack caught Garlikid completely flat footed. Fuming, Garlikid turned around to see who dared to attack it from behind.

"G-Gar?" the Hero Pokemon asked confusedly.

And much to its shock, standing there a few steps from the other Pokemon, was one of Cypress' Snopach, glaring at Garlikid with eyes full of resolve.

"Sno, snop!" the Tiny Tusk Pokemon cried.

"Gar, lik, liki!" Garlikid replied.

"Sno, sno!"

Then, one by one, the rest of Cypress Pokemon began to take a step forward, standing next to the first Snopach. Others instead placed themselves between Garlikid and Greninja.

"Gar? Garli?" Garlikid asked once again, anger fading into confusion as the Pokemon he allegedly had rescued turned against him and took the side of the humans.

"See, Garlikid?" Ash began, his voice sounding calmer, as his lips curved into a conciliatory smile. "You may think you were saving these Pokemon, but they are happy with Professor Cypress! I'm sure

you ran into those Team Omega jerks that mistreat and abuse Pokemon, but not all humans are like that!"

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu added for emphasis.

"In fact, people like Cypress and the other Pokemon Professors work really hard to make sure human and Pokemon can coexist in harmony," Ash continued. "They're the last people who would hurt a Pokemon."

Garlikid looked at Ash, then at the group of small Pokemon around it, almost as if looking for a hint that it was some kind of big deception. Ash could see the confusion in the Pokemon growing, as if the concept of human treating Pokemon with kindness was completely alien to it.

But there was no deception. The Pokemon didn't want Garlikid's "rescue".

The caped Pokemon stood there, fidgeting in the same spot, debating with the inner turmoil caused by the evidence that its cause wasn't as righteous as he believed. In the end, Garlikid made a decision.

"Gar... likid?" the Legendary Pokemon asked, before turning around, and with a mighty leap, left the chamber through one of the large holes in the ceiling, disappearing from sight.

There was a moment of silence as everybody processed what just happened. Moment that was broken when Cypress' Pokemon, now that their captor was gone, quickly rushed back towards her. As the implication that the battle was finally over settled, tension quickly dispelled from the air. Everybody breathed a sigh of relief, as Greninja returned back to his normal form, his body language considerably relaxing.

"In the end, Garlikid wasn't defeated by force, but by the bond between humans and Pokemon," Bamb'o noted. "Quite poetic, don't

you think so?"

"Poetic indeed," Larkspur agreed, as he adjusted his glasses.

"Let's hope that, wherever he goes next the Pokemon he saves do need rescuing," Serena pointed out.

After Ash and Alain returned their Pokemon to their pokeballs and thanked them for their battle against such a strong opponent, everybody got out of the cave and escorted the rescued Pokemon back to Rochfale Town, to their home in Professor Cypress' laboratory.

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Professor Cypress' Laboratory

Two hours later, most of the group was back at Professor Cypress' laboratory. Alain had gone to the Pokemon Center in order to have his Charizard healed and Mairin had gone with him, while Professor Larkspur decided that it was time for him to leave given that the crisis had been averted -not that he did much to help avert it- and the Moki Town twins returned to the Pokemon Center as well. Now that Larkspur's helicopter wasn't on the battlefield, they wanted to use it in order to give Vitor some more training before the coming Contest.

Meanwhile, Ash, Serena, Clemont, Bonnie and Professor Bamb'o were hearing about the status of the rescued Pokemon from Professor Cypress.

"My people checked the Pokemon. While the younger ones are a little shaken, all of them appear to be in good health and have no injuries or signs of being mistreated," Cypress told them, with no small amount of happiness in her voice.

"It's a relief to hear that," Clemont said.

"Given that that Garlikid guy fashioned himself a hero, he wouldn't have tried to harm those Pokemon," Serena reasoned.

"The fact that a Garlikid showed up at all it's such an incredible event," Bamb'o began. "Garlikid are like, super elusive. They live in areas away from human towns and cities, and in general tend to avoid contact with humans altogether. Despite the less than ideal circumstances, we've been lucky to not only see one close, but seeing him in action no less."

"No doubt it's thanks to Team Omega that this one showed up," Cypress said, as she took her glasses to clean them. "Let's hope that Garlikid doesn't target more scientists or innocent trainers."

"I like to think he realized he was in the wrong, and the next time he'll make sure to rescue Pokemon that truly need to be saved," Ash said.

"You're really sure about that, aren't you?" Bamb'o asked, chuckling at his unbound optimism.

"Well, if that wasn't the case, I don't think Garlikid would have left like that, right?" Ash asked back.

"Yeah. That was a very good speech you gave there, Ash," Serena said, smiling at him.

"Ow, come on, it wasn't that good," Ash bashfully replied, rubbing the back of his neck.

"It was! It encouraged the other Pokemon to speak up and stand up against Garlikid. If it wasn't for you... well, who knows what would have happened?" Bonnie asked.

"Indeed. Everybody in this laboratory, both human and Pokemon, are indebted to all of you. Especially you, Ash," Cypress said, as she turned around and walked towards a nearby table, where the PST prototype rested. "And I think I have the perfect reward for you."

And much to everybody's shock, she placed the device on Ash's hands.

"The PST?" he asked, looking at the small machine in his hands, before he tried to return it back to its creator. "I can't accept it! You and your team worked so hard on this, and there's no way-"

"Realx, Ash," Cypress said, giggling a little, as she pushed the PST back to him. "That's not the only one we have. Plus, if I'm being honest, I do have a selfish reason to hand you this."

"What?" Clemont asked.

"The PST works as expected so far, but the number of Pokemon we tested it on is very small. Thus, we need to make many more tests before it can be mass produced. You're a trainer that travels a lot, so you'll meet a lot of Pokemon in your journey to test the PST on. The PST is linked to our lab's servers, and it will feed us the data whenever you use it, data that we can use to improve it," the green haired professor explained.

"So in a way, we'd be like your field assistants, right?" Clemont summarized.

"More like beta testers," Cypress corrected. "Though, even after you have collected enough data, you can keep that PST if you wish so. Like I said before, consider it my thanks for helping us so much today."

"In that case... thanks a lot for this, Professor Cypress," Ash said, finally accepting the device.

"Yay! That means we can talk with our Pokemon all the time!" Bonnie cheered.

"Indeed. But make sure you treat it with care. We tried to make it as resistant as possible, but it's far from unbreakable," Cypress

advised. "If it breaks or malfunctions, you won't be able to have it fixed unless you return all the way back here."

"We'll make sure such a thing won't be necessary," Serena reassured her.

"Say, now that's settled, how about we return to the Pokemon Center?" Ash suggested. "Today's intensity made me really hungry, and I could use some dinner."

"What *doesn't* make you hungry, Ash?" Serena teased.

"Pi, pika," Pikachu shook his head while patting Ash's.

...

Maskara Sea

As the sun set over Tandor, Larkspur's helicopter soared through the skies, above the small sea that separated West Tandor from its Eastern counterpart. Inside that helicopter were Larkspur and his assistants. The former had a laptop on his lap, watching once again the battle between Garlikid, Greninja, and Charizard.

Despite the cameras hidden inside his assistants' sunglasses being so tiny they were invisible to the naked eye, the resolution of the video was sublime.

"Who would have guessed that what I initially believed would be just a courtesy visit could be so productive," the older man chuckled as he watched Charizard blast Garlikid with a Flamethrower.

"Those three Pokemon are quite impressive," the teal haired assistant commented. "Each of them could fetch a really high price in the black market."

"Indeed, Alina. Though, while Garlikid and Charizard have nothing to offer beyond mere power, that Greninja..." Larkspur began, as he paused the video, showing Greninja ready to attack. "To be able to

transform in a similar way to Mega Evolution but without a Keystone and Mega Stone... this is something that needs, no, *deserves* to be thoroughly studied."

"I assume that our next mission will be going after Ash and Alain's Pokemon, then?" the brunette woman asked.

"No Anika. I have a different plan for you and your sister," he said, closing down the laptop. "Given Garlikid's motivation, it won't be hard to use one of our bases to set up a trap. And once we have Garlikid under our control, taking down Ash and Alain will be child's play."

"Understood. I'll contact Zebos and tell him about this development as soon as we reach the base," Alina dutifully said.

"But what are we supposed to do then?" Anika insisted.

"You see, I had a chance to speak with the blond boy, Clemont, and he revealed to me a mostly interesting bit of information: they're currently building a new Power Plant next to where the old Epsilon Power Plant used to be. Not only will the restriction to access the island finally be lifted, but all the security will be focused on this new power plant as it finishes construction."

The two sisters' eyes were wide, and their mouths opened wide.

"That means..." Anika began.

Larkspur smirked wickedly. "That we'll be able to access the old Nuclear Power Plant Epsilon? Indeed. That will be your mission: infiltrate the place, and recover Project 092. Even after a whole decade, I *know* it's still down there, waiting for somebody bold enough to claim it.

"And with Project 092 back in our hands... Team Omega shall be unstoppable."

Author's Note: And with this chapter, we reach one of Uranium's most important milestones, which became even more important here: the confrontation with Garlikid!

In the game, you don't fight Garlikid directly at first (in fact, you never do), but he uses other Pokemon as if he were a trainer. But obviously that wasn't going to do here. Especially since, unlike the game, here we have people who are able to match him in terms of power.

And like in the game, Ash is rewarded with the PST for making Garlikid leave and rescuing the kidnapped Pokemon. Why Ash and not Alain, some of you might ask? Because it was thanks to Ash that the kidnapped Pokemon stood up to Garlikid and made him go away. And while in the game the PST is horribly underutilized, only used in a couple cutscenes, you can be sure that Ash and his friends will make a much more extensive use of such a wonderful gadget.

Now, let's go with the biggest revelation of this chapter. Many of you guessed that Larkspur would be connected to Team Omega, but none of you figured out to which extent, given that he's its very leader! Those of you who played the game know that Larkspur plays a huge role in the backstory, yet his role in the actual game is fairly minimal, so I'm changing that and giving him an expanded role befitting his importance. And while Larkspur only had a few generic goons in the game, here he has a whole villainous organization at his beck and call.

And said organization now has not just Ash but Alain as well on its sights. You can be sure this will become a very important factor in the future.

Thanks a lot to 61394, cricketlaxwolvesbandy, Fox McCloude, ShinyHunter145, Guest #1, hirowriter, Mi5ko and Viroro-kun for reviewing last chapter, and special thanks to Viroro-kun for his awesome job betareading this chapter.

Next time, Serena will attempt to win her third ribbon. Will she rise victorious, or will her winning streak come to an end?

Until then, don't forget to leave a review.

Vitor's Rematch: Newbie No More!

Chapter 21:

Vitor's Rematch: Newbie No More!

Rochfale Town

While Ash's group and Professor Bamb'o were in Professor Cypress' laboratory, the Moki twins accompanied Alain and Mairin to the Pokemon Center. Given that Larkspur's helicopter was no longer occupying the battleground, Natalie and Vitor decided to do some last minute training in preparation for the next day's contest.

"Leafeon, Magic Leaf!" Vitor ordered.

"Counter with Sludge Bomb, Minyan!" Natalie replied.

As Leafeon summoned a mass of glowing green leaves that quickly homed on Minyan, the Mischief Pokemon opened its tiny mouth, releasing a wave of dark purple sludge that stopped the leaves on their tracks.

"Now, Aerial Ace!" Vitor replied.

Fast as lightning, Leafeon jumped above the spot where the two attacks had collided, the leaf on its forehead glowing with a white light. Minyan was unable to stop Leafeon from delivering the unavoidable attack.

"Very good little bro, but you made a mistake there!" Natalie called.
"Minyan, Poison Fang!"

Minyan opened its mouth, its two tiny fangs glowing purple, before it sunk them into Leafeon's neck. The Verdant Pokemon screamed from the pain caused by the supereffective move, while several

glowing green dots flowed from Leafeon onto Minyan, healing the latter a little thanks to its unique Blood Lust ability.

"And follow with Poison Jab!" Natalie ordered.

"Block it with Iron Tail, quick!" Vitor urged.

Minyan's right claw glowed with a purple aura, as it prepared to slash Leafeon, whose tail had grown stiff and acquired a silvery sheen. Jumping back and twisting its body mid air, the Verdant Pokemon delivered a wide swipe with its metallic tail, swatting Minyan's Poison Jab aside. Both Pokemon glared at each other, as they waited for their respective trainers' next orders.

"It's getting a little late. Shall we call it a day and go back inside?" Natalie suggested. "My Pokemon and I could use some food. And yours could use some rest if they want to be ready for tomorrow."

"Alright," Vitor agreed, as he recalled Leafeon, while Natalie did the same. The two siblings then began walking towards the Pokemon Center.

"So, ready to win your second ribbon tomorrow?" Natalie asked, giving her twin a slap on the back, maybe a little too strong for the boy.

"Eh, yea, sure," he replied.

Natalie stopped, and raised her eyebrow. "You didn't sound very confident."

"I don't know what you are talking about. I ooze confidence!" Vitor replied, trying to put on a confident smile.

Sadly for him, Natalie was someone who could read him like a book and didn't buy the obvious deception. She merely sighed and crossed her arms.

"What are you afraid of, Vitor? I thought that after getting your first taste of victory, contests would look less like an uphill climb," Natalie said.

This time, it was the boy who sighed. "Yes, I know, I won once, so winning four more times shouldn't be a big deal. However, when I won my first ribbon I didn't have to fight against Serena."

"Serena? Are you afraid of her?" Natalie asked, unimpressed.

"You haven't seen her in action, sis. She's good. Like, really, really good," Vitor began to explain, his voice carrying some admiration. "You think you have her against the ropes, and bam! She completely turns the tide of the battle with an out of nowhere tactic. She's a veteran of a similar competition, and her Pokemon are both strong and very experienced."

"I haven't seen her fight, but if she's anything like Ash, I can picture it in my mind," Natalie replied. "Anyway, you can't let the thought of facing her intimidate you. I mean, if I plan to win the Tandor League, it's obvious I need to beat Ash. And you saw that Greninja of his in action. But am I going to let that stop me? Hell no! And you shouldn't let Serena scare you either.

"Besides, with the killer strategy you developed, she won't stand a chance," Natalie confidently said. She slapped his back once again, this time making him wince. "Plus, this is the first time I'm going to watch one of your contests live, so you better put on a good show!"

"I'll try," Vitor replied.

"What was that!?" she snarled, placing her fists on her hips as she shot her brother a burning glare.

"I mean... you'll see such an amazing performance you'll remember it forever?" he asked.

Natalie's scowl disappeared into a smile, and nodded. "Now, that's much better!"

...

The very next afternoon, almost everybody headed towards the town's Contest Hall. As usual, Ash, Clemont and Bonnie, accompanied by Natalie joined the line to buy tickets, while Serena and Vitor entered the building directly through the coordinator's door. After an admittedly long wait, the group of four bought their tickets.

Natalie scowled a little upon reading on her ticket that their seats were among the middle rows. "Man, I wish we could have gotten seats closer to the stage. I wanted to see Vitor up close."

"Given how many people come to see contests, one rarely gets the seats they'd want," Ash surmised. "Still, we have a pretty good view."

"Say, does anybody here sell popcorns, hot dogs, or the like? I could use some-"

"Shh! It's about to begin!" Bonnie shushed Natalie, as Jillian walked into the performance area as the spotlight focused on her. The three usual judges also walked to their seats.

"Ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to the Rochfale Town Pokemon Contest! I'm your host, Jillian Meridian," she began, and the crowd exploded into loud cheers. "Thank you! Also give a warm welcome to the judges that will evaluate our wonderful coordinators: Rochfale Town's own Nurse Joy, the Venesi City Gym Leader Rosalind, and the S-Class connoisseur Ambrose Reigns!"

"Huh. So that's why Nurse Joy wasn't at the Pokemon Center this morning," Natalie commented, as she crossed her arms over her chest. "Let's hope there isn't a medical emergency."

Jillian then went to explain the rules of the Pokemon Contests for those in the public not aware of them. This time, though, she pointed

out that trainers would have to use two Pokemon for both the Appeal Round and Contest Battles. She finished by showing the ribbon the contest winner would take with him or her, before introducing the very first contestant, beginning the Appeal Round.

Coordinators walked in and out of the arena one after the other, their Pokemon doing all kind of performances. Some of the Pokemon duos worked really well together, while those not as well trained got in each other's way. Rosalind and Nurse Joy often passed a positive judgment even to those who didn't appear so good, while Ambrose completely tore down the coordinators' display with brutal verbal beatdowns. Even if the shock value was lost after the first contest, his harsh words drew more than one coordinator to tears.

"Man, that guy's an asshole with a capital A," Natalie said, glaring at the connoisseur. "Vitor wasn't exaggerating when he told me about him."

"It was quite the shock the first time we heard him pass a judgment, but in the end, you get used to it," Clemont pointed out.

"Now, our next coordinator, from Vaniville Town in Kalos, Serena!" Jillian announced, as Serena walked onto the stage.

"There she is! Come on Serena, you can do it!" Bonnie cheered.

"Yeah, make them drop their jaws!" Ash added.

Serena turned towards the small ruckus Ash and Bonnie were making, and waved in their direction, before unclipping two of her pokeballs, and tossed them in front of her.

"Selkid, Chicoatl, go!" Serena called, sending out two of her three Tandorian Pokemon.

One of the pokeball produced a flurry of green leaves, while torrential water poured from the other. The green leaves gathered and formed a flower bud, while the water took the shape of a clam.

The bud and the clam opened at once, revealing Chicoatl and Selkid, respectively, before they burst into bits of light.

"Sel!"

"Chi!"

"Let's begin! Selkid, Ice Beam! Chicoatl, Grass Whistle!" Serena ordered.

As Selkid built a large block of ice with her Ice Beam, Chicoatl began to sing with Grass Whistle, and ethereal musical notes began floating around them. This continued until Selkid was done with the block of ice.

"Now let's switch! Selkid, Sing, and Chicoatl, Razor Leaf!"

Chicoatl began to bombard the block of ice with slashes of cutting-sharp leaves, as Selkid continued with the song the Green Chick Pokemon was intoning. A wave of "oohhhh" echoed through the hall as they noticed that the block of ice was taking an actual shape. Or better said, two shapes: Selkid and Chicoatl.

"Now, both of you, keep using Sing and Grass Whistle!"

The admittedly crude statue finished, Selkid and Chicoatl continued their duet, as they danced and moved around the ice sculpture of them, with more musical notes floating around. Some people began to hum the same melody the two Pokemon were singing.

"Now for the big finish, Energy Ball and Water Pulse!"

The two Pokemon went to the opposite ends of the statue, formed their attacks, and launched them above the statue. The two attacks met in the middle, exploding into a shower of water droplets and green energy bits that fell above the ice statue and sparkled under the light of the spotlight.

"And done!" Serena said, as Selkid and Chicoatl posed next to the statue.

The public broke into a loud applause, with many cheers thrown in between.

"Yay, way to go, Serena!" Ash shouted.

"You did great!" Clemont added, as he vigorously clapped.

"I must admit, that was pretty good," Natalie said, clapping as well. "Guess Vitor wasn't exaggerating."

"Thanks for a great performance!" Jillian said with her usual gusto. "Now let's see what our panel of judges has to say!"

As per usual, while Rosalind and Nurse Joy praised Serena for clever use of both visuals and song, Serena only got a harsh comment from Ambrose about making ice cream while singing off-key, though Serena did a good job ignoring him. After that, the Kalosian girl left the stage while Jillian introduced the next coordinator.

...

"Good job out there!"

As Serena returned to the Contestant Box, she was immediately greeted by Vitor, who looked rather impressed by the honey blonde's performance.

"Thanks!" Serena smiled in appreciation. "Chicoatl is a recent capture, and I didn't have much time to train her, but in the end it worked out perfectly."

"Heh, I know that feeling. The two Pokemon I'm going to use are also pretty recent captures," Vitor replied, as he held the two pokeball in question. "But I don't want to wait too much before using them, so they can start getting experience."

"Yeah. Training is all well and good, but nothing helps Pokemon improve more than the real deal. Even if sometimes it costs you a contest," Serena said, before she let out a high pitched gasp and covered her mouth with her hands when she realized the implications of what she just said. "Not that I'm saying that you're going to fail the Appeal Round or anything!"

Vitor, however, merely chuckled good naturedly. "I know. Using more inexperienced Pokemon is always a risk for obvious reasons. But even if it doesn't look like it, judges do keep count of what Pokemon coordinators use. And if a coordinator uses the same two or three Pokemon, and even worse, the same one or two performances, they will grant a lower score."

"Makes sense. People will get bored of any spectacle if it's the same thing over and over again," Serena said, nodding. Then, after letting out a nostalgic sigh, she added: "With how Contests roll, it feels weird to think that I managed to make it all the way to the finals of the Master Class Showcase back in Kalos with just three Pokemon."

"So few?" Vitor asked, raising an eyebrow. "Because it's pretty much impossible to make it to the Grand Festival without a full team. And some coordinators use even more Pokemon."

"Well, one only needed three Princess Keys for the Master Class Showcase," Serena began, expecting Vitor to understand that the keys were the equivalent to the ribbons. "When I had two keys, I pretty much had one foot there. Yet my two ribbons aren't even half of the ones I need."

"You have two ribbons already?" Vitor asked, amazed. "So after you beat me in Moki Town, you went to win another contest. You're on a roll!"

"They have some key differences, but once you get the hang of them, contests aren't that different from showcases, and I have some experience battling," Serena said. "What about you? I'm sure you must have won at least one contest already."

"Well, you're not wrong. I managed to finally score my first win after Moki," Vitor admitted a little sheepishly. "But it took me a while."

"Hey, don't feel discouraged. You only got your first Pokemon a couple months ago. And we aren't even halfway through the season," Serena reassured him. "You still have plenty of time to win the remaining ribbons."

"You seem to be very confident in my skills, aren't you?" Vitor asked.

"Why shouldn't I be? I saw you in action twice. We fought against each other not long ago, and you gave me quite the battle," Serena told him. "Just try your best, and you'll do great."

As Serena's words sunk in, Vitor's eyes were filled with resolve, and nodded.

...

"Now, our next coordinator, from Moki Town, Vitor!" Jillian announced as Vitor made his way onto the stage, with the people launching into an applause.

"There he is! Come on little bro! You can do it!" Natalie loudly hollered, as she got up from her seat.

"Go Vitor!" Ash cheered.

As the spotlight fell on the Moki Town boy, Vitor grabbed a pokeball on each hand, before tossing them into the air.

"Costraw, Cometeor, come out and play!" Vitor said.

The capture devices opened, releasing the Pokemon. A purple snake with a mohawk of the same color and a sucker-like mouth emerged among pink fireworks, while a floating rock with a single pink eye inside a diamond-shaped hole, amethyst crystals growing out of its back, and a single arm made of floating stone pieces came out from a storm of golden stars.

"Heh, look at that Pokemon, its mouth is so weird," Bonnie snickered, as she looked at the snake.

"That rock Pokemon... it looks a lot like the Comite we saw on Comet Cave," Clemont commented.

"Perhaps an evolution?" Ash guessed, as he pulled out his Pokedex and scanned the Pokemon in question.

" *Cometeor, the Bolide Pokemon, and Comite's evolution. Rock/Psychic. It levitates in the air with powerful psychic energy. The crystals on its body flash many colors when it meets another of its kind.*" the Pokedex explained.

"Yeah, Vitor caught that guy as a Comite when we crossed Comet Cave. Guess it must have been pretty strong the moment he caught it, since it evolved in no time," Natalie interjected, before pointing at Costraw. "And shortly after that, we met that one."

" *Costraw, the Sucker Pokemon. Poison/Psychic. At this stage of development, its telekinetic powers are weak. It instead defends itself by latching onto its foes and sucking out their life force.*" the Pokedex said when Ash trained it on Vitor's other Pokemon.

"Sucker Pokemon? Heh, that's not very appealing," Bonnie said, finding Costraw even funnier.

"Don't trash talk my brother's Pokemon until you have seen them in action," Natalie chastised the younger girl. "Look, he's about to start!"

Vitor took a deep breath, before looking at his Pokemon, and issuing the first order. "Cometeor, lift Costraw with Confusion!"

"Cooooom..." Cometeor cried in its buzz-like voice, its only eye glowing blue as an outline of the same color appeared around Costraw, lifting it into the air.

"Very good! Now make it spin, and Costraw, use Sludge!" Vitor said.

Costraw threw a stream of purple goo from its sucker-like mouth into the air as Cometeor spun it mid air, creating a purple swirling tornado.

"Great! Now add Thunder Wave to the mix, Costraw!" Vitor added.

"Traw!" the Pokemon cried, as Costraw's body started to crackle with electricity, as it sent electric waves towards the spinning sludge tornado, creating a flashy mix of dull purple and bright yellow.

"Let's keep it up guys! Cometeor, Ancient Power!" Vitor commanded.

A ring of glowing golden orbs orbited above Cometeor, before they grew into large boulders of the same color. Cometeor then sent said boulders towards the spinning tornado of sludge and electricity, making it even more attractive.

"And now for the big finish! Costraw, Cometeor, compress everything with Confusion!"

"Cos!"

"Meteor!"

The two Pokemon's eyes glowed blue, and the sludge, electricity and rocks, which were forming a tornado of lights, quickly compressed into a single ball, which ended up exploding into a multitude of fireworks-like blasts of purple, black, yellow and orange.

"And done!" Vitor said, just as Cometeor gently placed Costraw on the ground.

The public broke into applause. That, alongside the judges' mostly positive evaluation, made wonders to ease Vitor's nerves about doing well with new Pokemon. He returned Costraw and Cometeor to their pokeballs before thanking them, and returned to the waiting area.

...

About an hour later, the last coordinator finished their performance, bringing the Appeal Round to an end. Now, it was time to see which were the lucky coordinators who moved to the next phase.

"And thus the Appeal Round comes to a close!" Jillian announced. "Now, let's see which coordinators our esteemed trio of judges believe they deserve the most to move onto the Contest Battles!"

Everybody held their breath as one by one, the faces of the eight finalists appeared on the screen. This time Serena scored first, while Vitor was fourth. Once all eight finalists were revealed, the rest of the contestants either sighed in defeat, or groaned loudly, lamenting having been eliminated already.

"Yes! We passed!" Vitor cheered.

"See? I told you you'd do great!" Serena exclaimed.

"Not as good as you, though. First spot!" Vitor congratulated her. "And with a Pokemon you haven't used before!"

"Hey, top half with two Pokemon you haven't used before is nothing to scoff at either," Serena countered.

Their attempt to out-compliment the other was interrupted by Jillian's voice, whose announcement caught the attention of those present there. "Now, let's see which opponent our talented coordinators will have to battle against!"

The eight portraits began to shuffle for a few seconds, before they were paired up. Serena was in the second bracket, and Vitor was in the fourth. They wouldn't fight unless the two of them made it to the finals.

"See you in the finals?" Serena said with a knowing smile.

"You can count on it," Vitor said.

It didn't take much effort for Serena to reach the finals. Her choices this time around were Pancham and Minicorn, since the two of them had proven to work very well together.

Vitor, on the other hand, was using Leafeon once again, as well as his Pahar, which had evolved since the last time she had seen it, being now larger, with a row green feathers at the edge of its wings replacing the yellow ones, with a white and red large feather on its forehead and two smaller green feathers to the sides.

" Palij, the Fire Parrot Pokemon, and Pahar's evolution. Fire/Flying. Its curiously-shaped feathers allow it to create friction in the air as it flaps its wings. Sparks trail off of its feathers when it flies." the Pokedex revealed upon scanning the new Pokemon.

Vitor's Leafeon was as good a battler as Serena remembered, being the one taking the brunt of the fight, with Palij playing a more supportive role, helping Leafeon if it was overwhelmed and providing cover fire. Eventually, the two Pokemon carried Vitor to the finals as well, when they would test their mettle against Serena.

...

"Here it comes, the final battle!" Bonnie said, trembling in her seat. "Serena's about to get her third ribbon soon!"

"Hey, don't knock my brother out before the battle has even begun," Natalie chastised her.

Before either could say anything else, they were interrupted by Jillian, the spotlight back on her.

"And now the Rochfale Town contest reaches its exciting climax!" Jillian excitedly announced. "Everybody ready for the final battle?! On one side, we have Serena, from Vaniville Town, Kalos!"

The public cheered, Ash, Clemont and Bonnie being the loudest. Pikachu and Dedenne cheered as well.

"And on the other side, from Moki Town, Vitor!" Jillian continued.

The public cheered as well, though Natalie's cheers were so loud, they threatened to drown everybody else's.

"Five minutes on the clock! Begin!"

"Leafeon, Palij, come out and play!" Vitor said, tossing his pokeballs forward.

The capture devices opened, one releasing a storm of green leaves and flower petals of many colors, the other a tornado of yellow and orange flames. The petals and leaves merged into a single, large flower, before it burst into a thousand bits of light, revealing Leafeon, while Palij came out of the fiery tornado.

"Pancham, Minicorn, go!" Serena said, mimicking her opponent.

Serena's first pokeball released a flurry of golden stars, the Playful Pokemon appeared among them, turning them into golden dust with well-aimed punches and kicks, while the second one produced an explosion of pink mist with pink hearts added in. From the mist, Minicorn emerged.

"Heh, that's funny. Not only are Serena and Vitor facing each other again in the finals, they're even using the same Pokemon they chose the first time," Clemont said, before he amended: "Well, one of them, at least."

~Serena (Pancham, Minicorn) VS Vitor (Leafeon, Palij) ~

"We'll take the first move! Leafeon, Energy Ball! Palij, Will-O-Wisp!" Vitor ordered.

Leafeon formed a green sphere in front of it before launching it, while Palij exhaled several purplish blue fireballs. The two attacks merged, forming a green orb surrounded by a fiery blue aura.

"Very good, Vitor. But we're better!" Serena said, thrusting a hand forward. "Pancham, Dark Pulse! Minicorn, Charge Beam!"

Pancham cupped its paws, forming an orb of pure darkness, before thrusting them forward, the orb exploding into a beam. Meanwhile, Minicorn's horn glowed yellow, as she fired a straight electrical bolt forward. The two attacks merged into a beam of darkness surrounded by yellow sparks, and the combined move clashed against Vitor's, tearing through it and continuing towards Vitor's Pokemon.

"Quickly, dodge!" Vitor commanded.

Leafeon jumped away while Palij flew upwards just a couple seconds before the spot they were in was blasted by Serena's combo.

Vitor lost ten percent of his points.

"And our two finalists begin with a magnificent combo!" Jillian commented. "But Serena's has proved to be the better, thus Vitor is the first one to lose some points!"

"That means nothing! This battle has only begun!" Vitor said, his confidence unwavering. "Palij, Air Slash on Pancham!"

"Pancham, counter with Stone Edge!" Serena replied. "Do it like we practiced!"

As Palij flapped its wings, sending a few blades of compressed air towards the Playful Pokemon, Pancham slammed his paws on the ground, creating a row of rising rock pillars, each one a little taller than the one before, which successfully blocked the Flying-type move.

Vitor's points dropped even more.

"Now, Minicorn, climb onto those pillars and close the distance between you and Vitor's Pokemon!" Serena ordered.

Minicorn neighed in affirmation, and jumped onto the shortest stone pillar, expertly hopping from one to the other.

"I knew you'd do that!" Vitor said in triumph. "Leafeon, Magical Leaf on the Stone Edge! Slash it to shreds!"

"What? Minicorn, quickly, get off!" Serena shouted.

But it was too late. A mass of green glowing leaves made of energy appeared around Leafeon before they were sent towards the stone pillars, shredding it to smaller rocks and pebbles, including the one Minicorn was on top of, causing the foal Pokemon to fall to the ground painfully, before they disappeared completely.

"Micorn, are you okay?" A worried Serena asked, without noticing her points dropping for the first time.

Fortunately, the Foal Pokemon managed to get back on her hooves, and nodded.

"Press on Leafeon! Aerial Ace on Minicorn!" Vitor ordered.

Leafeon leaped towards the Normal and Fairy-type Pokemon, its tail and forehead leaf straightening and glowing with a bluish-white light.

"Pancham, block it with Thunder Punch!" Serena quickly ordered.

"Chan, pancham!" Pancham cried, as he landed in front of Minicorn, both fists crackling with electricity, and used them to parry the swipes Leafeon delivered with its forehead leaf and tail.

Both Serena and Vitor lost more points, but Serena continued in the lead.

"Pancham, jump onto Minicorn's back! And Minicorn, Fairy Wind!" Serena ordered.

The moment Leafeon's Aerial Ace ceased, Pancham also canceled Thunder Punch, and jumped backwards with several backflips,

landing on the Foal Pokemon's back, as Minicorn wiped out a gust of pink mist with sparkles of the same color.

"Palij, get in front of Leafeon and use Protect!" Vitor ordered.

The Fire Parrot Pokemon descended in front of its partner, and created a green energy shield in front of it, and the pink sparkling wind washed harmlessly over it, costing Serena a few points.

"Now Pancham, Dark Pulse!" Serena ordered.

Once again, Pancham fired yet another stream of black and purple energy towards Vitor's Pokemon. Just as Palij's protect vanished, hitting the unfortunate bird and sending it crashing against Leafeon, finishing in an explosion.

"Leafeon, Palij!" Vitor cried. "Are you guys okay?"

While hurt and a little bruised, Leafeon got back on its feet while Palij returned to the air, the two of them ready to continue the battle to the very end.

Vitor's points dropped even further. He had now lost more than half his points, while Serena still had about sixty percent left.

"This will be over soon. Not that I'm trashing your brother, but Serena's playing him like a fiddle," Bonnie said, sounding less like a boast on Serena's half and more like being sorry for Natalie.

"Nene," Dedenne nodded.

"I know Serena's good, but the match is far from over," Natalie insisted. "There's still half the time yet."

"You aren't wrong but... well, Serena has been dominating the match since its beginning," Ash said, trying to sound gentle. "And I'm not seeing Vitor using any tactics he hadn't used before."

Natalie turned towards Ash, and smirked confidently. "Exactly. That's why I helped my little bro come up with a new tactic. One that's going to turn the tables of this match," she then turned her sight back to the stage, her eyes glinting in anticipation.

From the stage, Vitor looked at Natalie, nodding to each other once their eyes met. Vitor's gaze then returned to Serena.

"You've been doing pretty good, Serena. If the match continued like this, I'd surely lose," Vitor shouted across the stage.

"But that's not going to be the case, is it?" Serena replied. "Let me guess, you have a new tactic up your sleeve?"

"Exactly. I'm going to admit it was luck that I managed to reach the finals without having to reveal it. But now that we're here and I tested what your Pokemon are capable of..." Vitor began, before his mouth curved into a gleeful smile. "Palij, Sunny Day!"

Palij cawed in affirmation as it opened its beak, forming a tiny orb of yellow light. It then launched said ball into the air, expanding its size until it was as big as a beach ball. The artificial sun bathed the stage in a bright yellow light, causing Serena and her Pokemon to shield their eyes momentarily until they got used to the more intense illumination.

"And Vitor covers the stage in a light so bright, it almost feels like we're outdoors!" Jillian said, before looking at the scoreboard. "The judges don't think this action alone merits Serena losing points! Will it be enough for Vitor to turn the tides of the battle?"

"You can bet it will! Palij, Incinerate!" Vitor ordered.

"Pa, pa!" Palij cawed, opening its beak and forming a fireball so large, it expanded out of it, before launching it at Pancham and Minicorn.

"Pancham, counter with Dark Pulse! Minicorn, stay behind Pancham and get ready!" Serena ordered.

"Leafeon, Aerial Ace on Pancham!" Vitor shouted.

As Pancham prepared the Dark-type move and Minicorn hid behind him, a yellow outline appeared around Leafeon while its forehead leaf and tail straightened and glowed with a bluish-white light. Then, Leafeon pretty much turned into a blur and smacked Pancham with the super-effective attack before the Playful Pokemon had time to fire his own move. Meanwhile, the empowered Incinerate blasted Minicorn, devoid of any cover.

"Pancham, Minicorn!" Serena cried, as her points dropped to match Vitor's.

"What? What just happened?" Bonnie asked, flabbergasted, ignoring the smug smile Natalie was shooting at her. "I know sunlight makes Fire-type attacks stronger, but how is that Leafeon moving so fast all of sudden?"

"My guess is that Leafeon's ability must be Chlorophyll," Clemont guessed. "Pokemon with this ability become much faster under strong sunlight."

"So that Sunny Day wasn't just for Palij, but for Leafeon as well," Ash said in realization. "Vitor picked those two Pokemon because they would both benefit from Sunny Day."

"Now, that tactic wouldn't have worked as well had Serena used her Braixen," Natalie argued. "But we checked Serena's previous contests, and we saw she used Braixen in her latest contest battle, so the chances of using her again were minimal. Vitor has this in the bag."

"Don't be so sure. That's a very sound tactic, but this isn't the first time Serena has been against difficult odds!" Ash replied, as his eyes drifted towards Serena. "I'm sure she'll be able to overcome Vitor."

...

Back on the stage, the new status quo had allowed Vitor to mark the pace of the battle and move onto the offensive.

"Leafeon, Energy Ball! Palij, Air Slash!" Vitor ordered.

As Leafeon fired yet another orb of green energy, Palij flapped its wings and launched a pair of blades of condensed air into its partner's attack. The two attacks merged into a crescent shaped blast of green and yellow energy.

Serena, however, wasn't planning on just letting the attack land.

"Minicorn, stop it with Charge Beam!" Serena called.

Minicorn's horn crackled with yellow sparks, before firing a yellow electric beam towards the combination move. Even if it managed to slow it down, Vitor's attack tore through the yellow beam with little effort. However, Serena wasn't expecting to stop the combination completely with a single attack.

"Now Pancham, Thunder Punch!" Serena ordered.

Pancham clenched his paw into a fist, which was engulfed in yellow sparks, and delivered a powerful blow to the Energy Ball/Air Slash combo, which, alongside Minicorn's Charge Beam, managed to destroy the attack completely, resulting in an explosion of yellow and green sparkles.

As Vitor's points dropped, Serena got her lead back.

"And now, let's get rid of that Sunny Day! Minicorn, use Fairy Wind around Pancham to shield him! And Pancham, Dark Pulse towards the artificial sun!" Serena ordered.

Pancham and Minicorn cried in agreement, as the latter summoned a tornado of sparkly pink mist around the Fighting-type -putting care

to ensure he wasn't harmed by the move- while Pancham fired a stream of dark power towards the artificial sun glowing above them.

"Palij, block that Dark Pulse with Protect! Leafeon, Aerial Ace on Pancham once again!" Vitor ordered.

The Fire Parrot Pokemon barreled towards Pancham's attack, encasing itself inside a green energy bubble just as it successfully intercepted the move. Leafeon wasn't so lucky, as it slammed against the impromptu shield of pink wind protecting Pancham, pushing it back.

Both coordinators lost points, with Serena still in the lead, having a quarter of her points left.

"One minute left!" Jillian reminded the two finalists.

Vitor looked at the scoreboard, and desperation began to settle in as he seemed to realize that his tactic wasn't yielding the results he was hoping for. Still, he managed to calm down, and shoot Serena a look full of resolve.

"You're a really tough nut to crack, Serena. It seems no matter what I try, I just can't defeat you," Vitor said.

"I still think you have the potential to do great things if you try your best," Serena replied, her eyes also glinting with determination.

"That doesn't mean I'm not going to do *my* best either!"

"Alright then, in that case, time to play my last card! Palij, grab Leafeon and fly into the air!"

After cawing in affirmation, the Fire Parrot Pokemon gripped Leafeon by its back with its talons, and showing far more strength than its lithe body would suggest, Palij lifted the Verdant Pokemon into the air.

Ash could see Serena smirking. Ash had used this very tactic against her during one of their spars not long ago, and the girl from Kalos clearly remembered the weaknesses she had found on it. If she was able to repeat what she did against him, then victory would be hers.

"Palij, use Incinerate and keep flying towards them! Leafeon, get ready!" Vitor said.

"Pancham, Minicorn, stay together, and use Dark Pulse and Charge Beam to counter that Incinerate!" Serena ordered.

Once again, Pancham and Minicorn fired their ranged moves, the two attacks merging into a stream of darkness surrounded by lightning, which tore through Palij's fireballs, the additional power they carried from Sunny Day proving to be insufficient to match two attacks at once, and it continued its way towards the Fire Parrot Pokemon and its Grass-type passenger.

With the additional weight of Leafeon, Palij would be unable to dodge, and right after using Incinerate it wouldn't be able to set up Protect in time. The moment the attack struck, Serena would have won.

But Vitor had something else in mind.

"Palij, drop Leafeon and fly away! Leafeon, Solar Blade!" Vitor called.

"Solar *what!?* " Serena repeated.

Palij dropped the load, and without Leafeon's weight to drag it down, it managed to fly away from the Dark Pulse/Charge Beam combination. Meanwhile, Leafeon's forehead leaf and tail began to glow with a golden light, quickly doubling in size, and soon as it landed, it slammed Pancham with the former and Minicorn with the latter, resulting in twin explosions of golden light that launched Serena's Pokemon in opposite directions.

Serena lost many points.

"No!" Bonnie cried.

"YES! Go Vitor!" Natalie loudly cheered, getting up from her seat.

BZZZZZZ!

"And time's out!" Jillian declared after the buzzer rang. "The winner of the Rochfale Town Contest is... !"

Both Serena and Vitor quickly turned their heads towards the scoreboard. Serena had little over a tenth of her points. Vitor had about fifteen percent.

"... Vitor, his Palij and his Leafeon!" Jillian cried.

The scoreboard changed to show Vitor's picture next to two smaller pictures of Palij and Leafeon, with the word "WINNER!" written under it.

"I won...?" Vitor repeated, as the results of the battle took a couple seconds to set it. "I won! I did it! I defeated Serena! Come here you guys!" Vitor said, and the equally joyous Palij and Leafeon basically pounced at their trainer, knocking him on his butt. The three of them laughed together.

Meanwhile, Serena just sighed sadly. Pancham and Minicorn, battered and bruised, but still with enough energy to walk on their own, practically dragged themselves towards their trainer, both looking at her with guilty eyes. Serena just smiled, and crouched next to them.

"Hey, you guys were amazing, so don't feel bad for now winning, okay?" Serena said, before looking at Vitor. "The last time we fought, I told Vitor that there was no shame in defeat, and that if he kept working hard, he'll eventually reach his dream. Let's apply that to ourselves, alright?"

Both Pancham and Minicorn nodded, before Serena recalled them to their pokeballs. A couple seconds later, Vitor walked towards Serena, and extended his hand at her.

"Hey, great match, Serena," Vitor said, smiling at her.

Serena smiled back, and took his hand. "Congratulations for your victory, Vitor. A well earned win."

"Hehe, thanks. Though, if it's any consolation, you made us work a lot for it," the brown haired boy replied.

"I'd hate it if I was an unworthy opponent," Serena replied. "Let's keep training hard so the next time we meet in a contest, our battle will be even better!"

A few minutes later, Vitor and his two Pokemon were standing on a small podium, the three judges and Jillian next to him.

This time, it was Ambrose who presented the winner with the box that held the ribbon inside. "Congratulations brat. You proved yourself the least awful of this sorry lot."

"Uh... thanks?" Vitor replied, unsure, as he grabbed the Rochfale Ribbon. However, as soon as the prize was in his hand, he pushed Ambrose's barbed comment, letting the euphoria of victory fill his whole body. He raised the ribbon above his head. "Yes! My second ribbon!"

"And thus, the Rochfale Town Contest comes to an end! I hope you have a great time, and see you next time!" Jillian said, officially ending the contest.

...

Two Hours Later, Pokemon Center

After the contest was over, the group bid the Moki Twins goodbye, as they left Rochfale Town and headed for their next destination,

Bealbeach City, as soon as possible. The siblings couldn't wait to get there, since that city was where their father worked at the Tandor Ranger HQ, so it would be a great chance to see him and catch up.

Even if it was the group's next destination as well, having both a Pokemon Gym and a Contest Hall where a contest would take place soon, Serena said that after her loss she didn't have the energy to get on the road so soon and wanted to rest first before continuing their journey. Thankfully, the rest of the group was gracious enough to accept her request and delay their journey until the next morning.

So here they were now, at the Pokemon Center. Ash and Clemont were on the adjacent battlefield, having a light spar -Orchynx has been learning how to use Iron Tail, and Ash believed a battle would give her the final push to master such a move-, while Serena was sitting at the lobby, Pokedex in hand, having just retrieved Pancham and Minicorn from Nurse Joy, the two Pokemon being back to full health.

Right now, she was reading the Pokedex's entry on Solar Blade. It was created merely two years before by an Alolan trainer, who took the principles behind Solar Beam, but had his Pokemon release the stored solar energy in the form of a blade rather than a beam. While it sacrificed range, it was more accurate, and the Pokemon's own strength was added to the attack, which was a perfect fit for a Grass-type.

"Hey Serena!" as if appearing out of nowhere. Bonnie suddenly piped in, startling Serena. "Whatcha doing?"

"Oh, um, hey Bonnie," Serena replied. "I'm looking at something at the Pokedex. I thought you were watching Ash and your brother spar?"

"Eh, I was, but they're going easy on each other and it's not as exciting to watch as usual," Bonnie said with a shrug, before she peeked at what Serena was checking on her Pokedex. "Solar Blade?"

Are you finding info on that because it's the attack Vitor used to beat you?"

"Yes. Well, yes, but not just that," Serena clarified. "It's not just that he used that attack to win, it's that I wasn't even aware that such an attack existed."

Bonnie read the part of the text that was visible on the screen. "Here it says that this attack has been developed recently. So not a lot of people knew about it. Ash and Clemont didn't."

"But Vitor did," Serena countered, somewhat bitterly. She uncsciously grabbed her blue ribbon. "And he's still a beginner trainer."

There was a moment of silence after Bonnie picked up Serena's upset mood.

"Are you... are you sad that you lost this contest?" Bonnie asked somewhat hesitantly.

"What? Oh no, of course not!" she reassured the younger girl. "Sure, losing is never fun, but I already made peace with the fact that you can't win all the time, and that failure is a part of life."

"I see," Bonnie replied, not all that convinced. "If you say so..."

Serena smiled, and placed a hand on Bonnie's shoulder. "Don't worry about me, Bonnie. I'll be much better after a good night of sleep."

Bonnie didn't say anything. She just smiled back -though Serena could tell her smile wasn't entirely genuine-, nodded and returned to the battlefield in order to continue watching her brother battling Ash, leaving Serena alone once again.

Author's Note: Yep, Serena lost the contest. I think we all know she was due for a loss, given her previous two wins in a row. And boy, it seems that Vitor, despite being a beginner, is improving at such a brisk speed if she's able to defeat Serena so early in their rivalry. Does this mean that Serena will be left behind as the gap keeps growing bigger?

I think I said in the past that I wanted Serena and Vitor's relationship to mimic Ash and Sawyer, with the two of them helping their respective rivals reaching their full potential while still trying to stay ahead of them. That similarity runs down much deeper, since I also wanted to show Vitor as somebody who's really good at coming up with clever tactics and has the foresight to do some research into what Pokemon can do and what attacks can learn rather than mere training, but who is dragged down by his own inexperience. And as you can see, the moment he acquires some experience, he's somebody that can give you a bad time.

Well, now that the contest is over, there's nothing left to do in Rochfale, and our heroes can continue their journey to Bealbeach City, which is a point where the story will get really good (and if you played the game, you know what I mean). But before that, we will see the fallout of Serena's defeat, and what effect it had on her.

Thanks a lot to Viroro-kun, Fox McCloud, John, 61394, and hirowriter for reviewing last chapter, and special thanks to Viroro-kun for his great job betareading this chapter.

And as usual, don't forget to leave a review with your thoughts on this chapter, and see you next time!

Training Doesn't Go the Way You Expect

Chapter 22:

When Training Doesn't Go the Way You Expect

Route 6 - Pahar Hills

It had been a couple days since the group had left Rochfale Town behind them, as they headed towards their next destination, Bealbeach City. Serena had warned them that the road towards said city from Rochfale was a long one, and they would take quite a few days to reach their destination, so they were taking the trip easy.

At first sight, Pahar Hills was not that different from Tancoon Way, the route on the other side of Rochfale: there were many trees full of red, orange, and yellow leaves that framed the man-made paths, giving the place an air of an eternal autumn.. But that's where the similarities ended. Unlike Tancoon Way, the grass that grew around the trees was of the same color as the leaves. There were also many bodies of water, adding some splatters of blue to the red and yellow palette of the zone, from small ponds to large rivers.

As the name implied, there were many Pahar, as well as their evolution, Palij, flying around the place, with a few Owten here and there as well. Lunapup, Minyan and Baaschaf wandered on the ground, while Sponee, as well as another yellow bug Pokemon with brown stripes and blue legs they had never seen before, crawled the trees in search of food.

" Tricwe, the Shock Bug Pokemon. Bug. Related to Smore and Sponee, Tricwe is very hyperactive and loves nothing better than sneaking up behind trainers and scaring them," the Pokedex supplied once the new Pokemon was scanned.

"I was going to suggest we stop and set up camp here, but upon hearing that, I prefer if we find a spot free from potential pranksters," Clemont said.

"Better a prankster than a thief," Serena pointed out, the memory of the Pokemon thieves still present in her mind.

"Well, we didn't see any Ranger or sign warning us of danger, so I think we're safe here," Ash said.

Still, they decided to humor Clemont and find a spot away from the Tricwe. Once they had finally set up their camp, it was time for their Pokemon to come out so they could breathe fresh air and stretch their legs.

"Come out everybody!"

One by one, all their Pokemon materialized in front of them. Many yawned, others stretched, and others looked around, taking in the surroundings.

Greninja immediately prepared to fire an Ice Beam in order to form an igloo for Colarva to literally chill, but the Ninja Pokemon realized the little bug didn't appear to be as uncomfortable as he used to be whenever he was out of the pokeball.

"Gre! Greninja!" Greninja called Ash, and nodded at Colarva.

Ash looked at the Snow Mite Pokemon, and took only a couple seconds to understand what Greninja meant.

"Hey, you're right, Colarva doesn't appear to be about to have a heatstroke. Maybe he finally got used to a warmer climate?" Ash pondered, before walking towards the Bug-type. "Say, how are you feeling, little guy?"

"Co! Colarva!" Colarva happily chirped, and he quickly glomped Ash's leg, making him lose balance for a second.

"Heh, I take it you're feeling great. Well, no more igloo then. That means you're getting much stronger!" Ash said, smiling and nodding at the bug still latched to his leg. The boy then looked at Serena, who was surrounded by her own Pokemon. "Hey Serena, do you want to spar?"

"Maybe not today. I would like to focus more on training my team on my own right now. Is that okay with you?" she asked unsurely.

However, Ash's smile didn't falter. "Of course, if that's what you want to do, go ahead."

"Great. Let's find a spot where we can train without getting into each other's way," Serena said, as she began to walk away. "Come on everybody, there's much work to do today!"

As Ash watched Serena go, he looked at his Pokemon. He was already planning to focus on Colarva, and began to wonder who he could choose to be his partner. "Given that I won't be training with Serena, I think I could use Dunsparce. What do you say pal? Ready to train?"

"Parce..." Dunsparce let out a despondent sigh as if he was making a huge sacrifice by accepting Ash's request.

"What about you, Clemont?" Ash asked.

The inventor looked at his two newest Pokemon. "I think I'll continue with Eletux and Eevee. The two of them are progressing at a good pace. In no time, they'll be on a similar level to Luxray and Bunnelby."

"What about Chespin?" Bonnie chimed in. "I don't see you training with him much."

"Yeah, I don't think I've seen you focus on Chespin in a while" Ash pointed out. "How is it that you don't train him anymore?"

Clemont looked at where Chespin was, sitting against a tree stump, while stuffing his mouth with several berries he had gathered from a nearby bush. It seemed that the Spiny Nut Pokemon hadn't heard them mention his name, perhaps a bit too engrossed with his food. The inventor sighed. "I'd love to, but Chespin isn't as up to training as my other Pokemon are. It seems he only fights when he has to. Unless there's danger, the only things he likes to do is eat and slack around," Clemont explained.

Bonnie crossed her arms. "You know Clemont, I think you're being a little harsh on Chespin. I know he's far from being Luxray, but I'm sure he tries his best."

"He surely tries his best at stuffing as much food in his mouth as possible," Clemont deadpanned. "Though that's probably for the better. When he isn't still, he's either picking fights with Pancham or wandering around and getting into trouble," Clemont continued, before he sighed again.

"You know, I had seen my fair share of Pokemon who weren't that keen on training. Most of the time, unless there was some major problem at play, they simply lacked motivation," Ash gently said. "I'm sure you could have Chespin training just as much as everybody else to stoke his enthusiasm."

"That's easier said than done, Ash. Like I think I said more than once, food is the only thing that motivates Chespin." Clemont said, before looking back at the spot Chespin was sitting at, only to find it empty. "Huh? Where did Chespin go?"

"Maybe to find more food?" Ash weakly offered.

"I'll see where he went. You two keep training in the meantime," Bonnie said, as she began to walk away.

...

Chespin sat sadly against a rock, as he dejectedly looked at the water running of a nearby river, some Pokemon swimming under the surface. Chespin looked at the remaining berry in his hand, and not feeling hungry, he lazily tossed it into the water, crashing with a splash.

Contrary to what Clemont believed, Chespin did hear what his trainer and the other humans said about him. At first, he was both angry and sad over hearing what his trainer had to say about him. However, upon further reflection, the anger faded into disappointment with himself as he realized that what Clemont said wasn't entirely wrong.

He didn't like training, that much was true. What was the point? It's not that Clemont took part in competitions like Ash and Serena did, so he didn't need to stay in top shape or anything. Life was too short not to enjoy it. And while Clemont was content with leaving Chespin be, that came at the cost of being the least favorite of his team.

Chespin was torn. On one hand, he wanted to both prove Clemont wrong and earn the respect of his trainer. But on the other hand... well, habits were hard to break, and his lazy nature was no different. Plus, if he went and asked Clemont to train him, chances are Clemont wouldn't take him seriously.

"You heard what Clemont said, didn't you?" a voice said from behind, startling the Grass-type Pokemon.

Jumping to his feet, Chespin quickly turned around, and standing before him was Bonnie, her eyes looking at him with a mixture of pity and sympathy.

"Ches..." Chespin said, lowering his head.

Bonnie didn't say anything, she just walked and sat beside him, Chespin doing the same.

"Hey, don't be so glum. I think you're a Pokemon with a lot of potential," Bonnie said.

"Ches?" Chespin asked, sounding a little incredulous. After what Clemont had said, Bonnie's words could feel a little like empty compliments.

"Yes! I mean, I saw you battle many times. Plus, didn't you help Ash that time in Passage Cave?" Bonnie asked.

"Pin..." Chespin weakly nodded. Then again, it was Greninja who did most of the job taking down that Terlard. Chespin just provided some support.

"And deep down, my brother also thinks you have a lot of potential. All you have to do is show him what you're capable of!" Bonnie said, energetically thrusting a punch forward.

"Nene!" Dedenne added, mimicking his trainer.

Bonnie's enthusiasm appeared to be contagious, as Chespin felt a little more eager to prove Clemont his worth.

"Ches, chespin!" Chespin said, now with more energy.

"Great! Let's show everybody what you're made of," Bonnie said, as she stood up. "Ash says that the best way to bring a Pokemon's potential is to motivate them, and I think I know how to motivate you to train. You should go back to the camp before Clemont worries. I need to talk with Serena first."

...

A few minutes later, Bonnie found Serena, training with all six of her Pokemon near another small river. They seemed to be hard at work, as Bonnie could see every Pokemon using one attack while Serena, Pokedex in hand, directed them, her voice overflowing with energy.

"Come on Braixen, let's see if you can make Fire Blast wider, " Serena told Braixen, who was practicing the aforementioned move

"Keep punching, Pancham! Let's see if you can learn Fire or Ice Punch! Keep working on that Double Kick, Minicorn!"

"Whoa..." Bonnie whispered in awe. She knew Serena was far from a slacker, but the intensity she was training now was something completely new. Was it because of the recent loss? Serena didn't act like that when she lost her first contest. "Hey, Serena?"

Serena turned around, and saw the younger girl approaching her. Serena smiled. "Hey, Bonnie! Did you come to watch our training?"

"Actually, I came to you to ask for a favor," Bonnie asked.

"If I can do it, sure. What is it?" Serena said.

"I wonder if you could prepare some pokepuffs for me. Especially those Chespin likes a lot," Bonnie said.

"Chespin likes almost all of them," Serena said, chuckling a little. "But yeah, I know which ones you are talking about. May I ask why, though? Not that I mind doing them, but I believe the last thing Chespin needs is to eat more."

"I think it would be a cool way to motivate him into training more seriously," Bonnie said. "I read somewhere that giving Pokemon prizes whenever they make progress in their training pushes them to train harder."

"That's... a really clever idea, Bonnie! I'll have those pokepuffs done by tonight," she promised. Then, as a thought crossed her mind, she added: "Though, now that you mention Chespin, I don't remember Clemont training him that much since we came to Tandor. In fact, he now spends most of his time with Eletux and Eevee."

"I know. That's why I'm going to train Chespin, and show big brother how cool he can be," Bonnie proudly said, puffing her chest out a little. "I'll be able to become a trainer in less than a year, you know,

so this will also serve as a warm-up for when I have my own Pokemon besides Dedenne!"

"That's good, though Chespin might be a little too challenging for a beginner," Serena said, giggling a little. "So, is that all you want from me?"

Now that you mention it..." Bonnie began, her eyes drifting towards Serena's Pokedex. "Can I borrow your Pokedex? I think it could be of help with training Chespin. I don't even know what attacks he can learn."

"I'm sorry, but I can't do that. I need it right now for our training," Serena said apologetically. "Why don't you ask Ash to lend you his?"

"But you never use your Pokedex when you train," Bonnie pointed out, a light scowl slowly developing on her face. "In fact... this looks almost nothing like how you usually train."

"I know, and that's the point," Serena said, a little forcefully. "The latest contest showed me that I'm becoming a little complacent. Neither me nor my Pokemon can rest on our laurels just because we got a couple wins, you know? And the more attacks they learn and master, the better we'll do in the contests."

There was a tense moment of silence, as the two girls held their stare. Bonnie was the first one to avert it.

"If you say so," Bonnie said, as she turned around and began walking away. "I'll ask Ash for his Pokedex, then."

As Bonnie walked back towards the camp site, she could once again hear Serena shout orders and encouragement to her Pokemon as they trained, with far more energy than usual.

...

Once Bonnie returned to the camp, she saw that Chespin was there, an unreadable expression on his face replacing his usual nonchalant demeanor, looking at Clemont as he commanded Eevee and Elettix in a sparring match against Ash's Dunsparce and Colarva.

A little away from the battle, the lemon blonde could see Ash's Orchynx, still trying to master Iron Tail under Pikachu's watch, while Ash's Aveden was engaging her brother's Bunnelby in another spar of their own. Greninja and Luxray kept watch over the camp like they usually did.

Wordlessly, Bonnie joined Chespin and watched the battle together, which lasted for about half an hour, with no clear winner.

"Alright everyone, good job!" Ash praised his Pokemon, something that they appreciated. "It's going to get dark soon, so let's take a break here. Soon it will be time for dinner!"

"Hey guys!" Bonnie said, as she walked towards the two of them. "I want to ask you a couple things!"

"Sure thing! What do you want?" Ash asked, smiling.

"First, given that you're not paying him that much attention, could I train Chespin myself?" Bonnie asked sweetly.

Clemont raised an eyebrow. "Eh... sure. If you're able to make him listen to you, go ahead," Clemont said. Bonnie whispered a cheer in victory.

"I think Chespin has a lot of potential. He only needs the right push to bring it to the surface," Bonnie said.

Ash nodded approvingly. "Spoken like a true trainer, Bonnie! Every Pokemon has something to offer, though they have different ways to show it."

Bonnie giggled, and couldn't help but even blush a little at receiving praise from Ash himself. "Well, I'm going to be a trainer soon, so I better start acting as one already, right?"

"Though, why the interest? Do you want me to transfer Chespin to you or something?" Clemont asked, as his eyes drifted towards Chespin, who watched the exchange with the same unreadable expression as before.

"I just think you're giving up on Chespin too soon," Bonnie said. "I know he isn't really that much into training, but with the right motivation..."

"Well, it's just that he's not really the most training happy Pokémon. If you find a way to motivate Chespin that works, be sure to share it with me later," Clemont said, half-jokingly..

Bonnie ignored her brother's comment, and looked at Ash. "Say Ash, can I borrow your Pokedex? I need it to see what moves Chespin can learn."

"Sure!" Ash said, handing her the device, no conditions attached. "Be careful with it, alright?"

"You can be sure I will! I know how important it is!," Bonnie said.

"Okay, I trust you'll handle it with care," Ash gently said. Then, he looked around, as if looking for something. "Hey, has Serena returned yet? Is she still training?"

"I guess so," Bonnie replied.

"Weird. Serena never trains longer than I do," Ash said, scratching his cheek. Bonnie knew Ash was remembering all the times Serena chastised Ash for spending too much time training and that he should take it easier, only for her to ignore her own advice now.

"I think she took that last defeat pretty badly," Bonnie said, folding her arms behind her back. "When I saw her, she was training way harder than she usually did. Maybe you should talk with her, Ash. I'm kind of worried for her."

"Now, let's not get worried prematurely," Clemont intervened. "It's obvious that losing must have affected her in some way, but not to that point."

"Yeah. Serena learned to take defeat in stride a long time ago," Ash agreed with the inventor.

But time passed, and Serena didn't return. When the sun completely set, paving the way for the darkness of the night, Serena didn't return either. An hour after that, Ash and Clemont were starting to worry, and Ash was ready to call her on her Pokégear to check if she was okay. It was that moment when they finally saw her return.

"Hey there!" Serena happily greeted the rest of the group, waving at them. "Sorry for the lateness! I kinda lost track of time, and when I realized, it was already nighttime!"

"Serena?" Ash asked, as worry began to creep up his spine. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Why do you ask?"

Serena looked... way less than fine. Despite her excited demeanor, the Kalosian girl was covered in soot, sweat, and had some burn marks here and there. Her Pokémon weren't much better, all of them looking exhausted.

"I see you've been training a lot," Ash said, the understatement of his words being left unsaid.

"Yup! We've been hard at work today, and made a lot of progress!" Serena proudly stated. "If we keep this up, in our next contest we'll wipe the floor with the competition!"

Ash and Clemont traded worried glances, before they looked at Bonnie, a silent "See what I meant?" floating between them.

For the time being, they decided not to say anything, and to leave the topic for later.

...

The next day, the group was up as soon as the sun emerged from the east. After a quick breakfast, they continued their journey through Pahar Hills without any incident, taking on the beautiful sights the route had to offer. And, like the day before, once it was past noon, they found a spot to set up a campsite, and let all their Pokemon out of their pokeballs. And sometime after that, they had lunch.

"Say, what's the plan for today?" Ash asked Serena. "More training on your own?"

"Yes. I think we're making a lot of progress. If we keep this up, the next contest will be a piece of cake," Serena said.

As those words left her lips, Sylveon, Minicorn and Chicoatl cringed. Braixen patted Chicoatl on the head, as if trying to reassure or calm her down. Something that didn't go unnoticed by the other three humans.

"That's great but... try to take it easy, you know? Don't push your Pokemon too hard," Ash warned her.

"My Pokemon are more than ready to train. Tell him, guys!" Serena said, looking at where her Pokemon were gathering.

She got a rather halfhearted chorus of affirmation cries. Serena scowled a little. "Come on guys, I know it can feel a little like an uphill climb, but if we all put in some effort, it will pay off!"

Her Pokemon cried again, this time trying to put a little more energy, something that seemed to please Serena, but not so much her

friends.

"Maybe you can later have another sparring battle against me?" Ash suggested. "So we both can see how much you and your Pokemon have improved."

"Sure, but we still have plenty of work to do on our own," Serena replied. She then looked at Bonnie. "And I'm not the only one, right?"

"Yup! Chespin and I begin our training today, Right, Chespin?" Bonnie asked, looking at the Spiny Nut Pokemon, wolfing down his food.

"Che, chespin!" Chespin cried happily, his mouth completely full.

"Yeah, you better eat, since you're going to need a lot of energy for all the hard work ahead of you!" She said.

"Ches?" this time, he sounded less enthusiastic.

...

An hour later, Bonnie and Chespin were on a spacious forest clearing, devoid of any tripping hazards, and no nearby wild Pokemon that might have gotten in the way. There was a pile of various items that Bonnie had brought from the campsite, which she believed could be useful in their training.

Aside from Chespin, Clemont had sent Luxray with them in order to watch over them, as well as to keep them safe in case they found themselves in any danger. The Gleam Eyes Pokemon was lying on his stomach, head resting over crossed paws, as he watched intently both his teammate and his trainer's sister.

"Alright Chespin, time to show Clemont what you're capable of!" Bonnie stated, her voice full of youthful resolve, a small basket on her hand. "See, I have the perfect way to motivate you. Do you know what's this?" she asked, showing him the basket.

"Ches?" Chespin asked, tilting his head.

Bonnie opened the small basket, and pulled out a yellow and brown pokepuff. Chespin's eyes widened a little. "I had Serena bake some of those pokepuffs you like so much! And if you do a-HEY!"

As Bonnie talked, Chespin used Vine Whip to snatch the pokepuff from her hand and bring it to his mouth, before devouring it in one bite.

"Ches, chespin!" Chespin happily said, chewing the delicious treat.

"Hey, you weren't supposed to eat it now!" Bonnie protested, stomping her foot. "Those were prizes for making progress in your training!"

"Nenene!" Dedenne also chided Chespin.

"Pin..." Chespin said, almost as if sounding regretful. Though Bonnie couldn't tell if he was being sincere or not, she wasn't going to draw another pokepuff out of the basket.

"Alright, ready to begin your training?" Bonnie began. "I've been checking the list of moves you can learn. Given that you're kind of a hardhead, how about Iron Head?" the lemon blonde then went to the pile of random items, and grabbed an old-looking pillow, and held it in front of herself. "So let's train by headbutting this pillow!"

Chespin nodded, and did so, diving headfirst into the pillow. He hit it with enough force to push Bonnie back a little.

"Not bad, that was far from an Iron Head. Try to give it more power!" Bonnie advised.

Chespin headbutted against the pillow a second time, with the same result.

"Come, on again!" Bonnie said.

Chespin obeyed, but nothing changed.

"No, this isn't a headbutt! Just..." Bonnie placed a finger under her chin as she tried to find the proper words to explain something she had never experienced. "Just try to emulate what Pikachu does when he uses Iron Tail! But instead of the tail, apply it to the head!"

"... ches?" Chespin tilted his head at her in slight confusion.

"Come on, keep trying! Sooner or later, you'll get it right!" Bonnie encouraged.

Chespin continued headbutting the pillow, but nothing he did came close to an Iron Head. Eventually, the Grass-type grew tired, and lied on the yellow grass, gasping for air.

"You're tired already?" Bonnie asked, walking towards the exhausted Chespin, one hand on her hip. "Come on Chespin, I know you can do more than that!"

"Ches..." Chespin breathed.

"Come on Chespin, if you keep working more, I'll give you a pokepuff!" She said, pulling out the delicious treat from the small basket. Unlike the other time, however, Chespin didn't react. "Really? Don't you want this Pokepuff?" Once again, no response. "Ugh, *Kung Fu Pangoro* made this look so much easier..."

"Lux," Luxray softly said, catching Bonnie's attention. Bonnie looked at the Gloom Eyes Pokemon, who merely shook his head, as if telling Bonnie that this was as far as she'd reach for the time being.

She reluctantly accepted. "Alright, this is your first day of training seriously, so let's call it a day. You may have not learned a new attack, but here, have this anyway, a reward for working hard!"

And Bonnie picked a pokepuff from the small basket, and placed it on Chespin's stomach. The Spiny Nut Pokemon grabbed it and

slowly brought it to his mouth, and began eating it.

"Come on, let's go back to Clemont and Ash," Bonnie said, as she headed back to the camp, Chespin and Luxray walking behind her.

...

When Bonnie, Chespin and Luxray returned to the camp, they saw Ash and Clemont engaged in a sparring battle. Ash was using Orchynx, while Clemont was using Eevee. Meanwhile, every other Pokemon -minus Greninja, who was seemingly meditating under a tree- were playing by tossing a ball at either Colarva or Eletux, and they would try to catch it with either String Shot or Electroweb.

"Come on Eevee, Shadow Ball!" Clemont ordered.

"Ev!" Eevee cried, opening his mouth and forming a sphere of darkness in front of it, before firing it at the grass feline.

"Counter it with Iron Tail!" Ash replied.

"Chynx!" Orchynx meowed, as her tail turned completely stiff, shining with a silvery sheen, and smashed into the coming ghostly projectile, shattering it to tiny black bits, much to Eevee's displeasure.

"Good job, Orchynx! You've finally mastered Iron Tail!" Ash praised the cat.

"Or, orchynx!" she proudly meowed.

"Vee..." Eevee growled, somewhat annoyed that his attack had been stopped like that.

And Eevee wasn't the only one annoyed.

"*Look at Orchynx, already having learned a new move,*" Bonnie thought, as she involuntarily pouted a little.

"Hey, there!" Bonnie greeted, as she walked towards the camp.

Clemont turned around towards his sister. "Oh, hey, Bonnie! Back already?"

"How was the training?" Ash quickly asked.

"Eh, it was..." he looked at Chespin, walking slowly behind her. "It was good! For a start, it was pretty good!"

"Good to hear that! I thought Chespin would give you more trouble, but you sound confident," Clemont said.

"Eh... well, we mostly did some warm up for the REAL training, you know?" Bonnie clarified. Feeling a little uncomfortable, she quickly changed the topic of the conversation. "I take Serena isn't back yet either?"

"No. I imagine she's still training with her Pokemon," Ash deduced. He looked in the direction Serena had left a few hours ago, and sighed softly. "I guess it'll take some time for her to come back, if yesterday was any indication. So, do you want to do something before dinner?"

"Not today. Training left me a little tired," Bonnie said, letting out a sigh of exhaustion. "Pokemon might do most of the work, but being a trainer can be quite draining."

"I know, right? It feels like you spend as much energy directing your Pokemon as they do training," Ash said, his lips curving into a somewhat nostalgic grin. "But it gets better over time."

Eventually, Ash and Clemont wrapped up the training, and the two of them moved to prepare the camp for dinnertime, with Bonnie helping them in any way she could. Once they were done, she just sat on a nearby stump, and to pass time, she began to play with Dedenne.

And just like the day before, hours passed, and Serena didn't return, not that it surprised her in the least.

It had only been one day, but the lack of progress with Chespin was a little discouraging. A part of her said that there was a reason for her brother to not focus on Chespin for the sake of other Pokemon more willing to better themselves, and that she was being arrogant for thinking she could do better than Lumiose City's Gym Leader. On the other hand, Ash had said that there was no worthless Pokemon, and she wanted to believe that.

But if there was nothing wrong with Chespin, then that means there was something wrong with *her* . A conclusion she didn't like in the slightest.

"What am I doing wrong?" Bonnie whispered to herself.

"Probably nothing," Bonnie was startled upon hearing Ash's voice from behind, letting out a high pitched squeal. "Sorry, sorry! I didn't want to spook you," Ash chuckled, as he walked towards her, and sat on the grass beside the tree stump. "I take training Chespin didn't go as smoothly as you tried to make us believe?"

"No," Bonnie admitted, as her shoulders sagged. "At least Clemont did believe my lie. Otherwise he'd be telling me 'I told you so' like he likes to do when he's right and I'm not."

"Oh, you didn't fool Clemont either," Ash told Bonnie. Upon seeing the girl's surprised face, he added: "He didn't want to discourage you from trying to train Chespin. You should give your brother a little more credit."

Bonnie didn't say anything.

"Though, I don't want you to get discouraged because you aren't making as much progress as you think you should," Ash told her. "Stuff like this takes time, you know?"

"You make it look so easy," Bonnie said. "I mean, Orchynx just learned a new move today."

"No. Orchynx has been practicing Iron Tail since we were in Rochfale, and it wasn't until today that she got it down," Ash clarified.

"Oh," was all Bonnie could say.

"So yeah. Then again, don't get frustrated if Chespin takes more time to learn something new. There are no two Pokemon alike," Ash continued. "Tell me, did you feel like tossing the towel? Be honest, I promise I won't judge you."

"... yes," Bonnie admitted. "I mean, if Clemont stopped training him... there must be a reason."

"Clemont doesn't take part in competitions, at least when he's not in the Gym, so he doesn't need every Pokemon to be in top shape," Ash explained. "So he can afford to focus on Pokemon who are more motivated to train."

"I thought I could use food to motivate Chespin, but it seems that's not enough to push him into working harder," Bonnie told Ash.

"And you think Clemont didn't try that?" Ash asked her, making her realize her idea wasn't as brilliant and revolutionary as she initially believed.

"Then... what can I do? What would you do if you were in my place?" Bonnie asked. "With all the Pokemon you have, I'm sure you must have had some trouble training some of them."

"And you wouldn't be wrong," Ash chuckled. "As for my advice? Don't give up. I know it sounds like a cliché, but this is very important. You took over Chespin's training because you believed in his potential, didn't you?"

"Yeah."

"And when you trained Chespin, did he at least listen to you, even if you aren't his official trainer?" Ash asked.

"At first. But then he got tired and didn't want to train anymore. Not even with the promise of his favorite pokepuffs," Bonnie said, resting her head on her hands, the memory leaving a sour taste in her mouth.

"Getting a Pokemon to listen to you is much harder than most people think, and you have that part down. That means that Chespin is willing to work with you, even if he might not be that motivated," Ash reassured her. "A Pokemon will notice when their trainer has faith in them. If you keep having faith in Chespin, Chespin will reward that faith. I can promise you as much."

As Bonnie soaked those words, she felt a little more reinvigorated. She smiled and nodded. "Alright. In that case, I'll keep the training going on. Even if I can't get Chespin to learn a move before Clemont leaves... well, at least I hope Chespin knows that I believe in him."

Ash nodded, proud of her. "Well said."

"Hey look, Serena is back!" the two of them heard Clemont say.

Looking in the direction Clemont was looking, Bonnie and Ash saw Serena walking towards the camp, her Pokemon trailing behind her. Her radiant smile was a sharp contrast to, once again, the rather sorry state she was in, with her clothes full of dirt and her body covered in sweat. Her Pokemon were so tired, they were basically dragging their feet behind her.

"Hey there!" Serena saluted, waving her hand. "Sorry for the lateness! I know it's the same thing I said yesterday, but whew! Time just flew by!" she said, sounding worryingly chipper.

"Serena?" Ash asked, a little stumped by the image in front of him. "Are you... are you alright?"

She tilted her head quizzically. "I'm feeling great, especially with all the progress we've made today."

"Your Pokemon don't feel that great," Ash pointed out. "In fact, they look like they could collapse at any moment."

"Nonsense! Sure, we've dialed up the training a notch, but they can take it," Serena said, and prove her point, she turned around, and asked: "Right guys?"

All her Pokemon smiled and cried in agreement. Though both Ash and Bonnie could feel that they were just putting up a front for the sake of their trainer.

"See? Nothing to be worried about," Serena happily said. "Come on guys, let's have a light dinner and go to bed early. Tomorrow we have to train even more!"

Once Serena and her Pokemon were out of sight, Bonnie shot Ash a flat glare. The message was unsaid but crystal clear.

"Alright, I'll talk with her soon, I promise," Ash told Bonnie.

...

The next day, the group was once again ready to continue their journey as soon as the sun was up. They would finally say goodbye to Pahar Hills. There would be no training this day, given the kind of path they had to take in order to continue their trip towards Bealbeach City.

"According to the map, in order to reach Route 7, also called Tandor Sheets, we have to cross another cave, Rochfale Tunnel," Serena announced while reading from her tablet.

This drew a chorus of tired groans. After Passage Cave and Comet Cave, no one was in the mood for yet *another* hellish cave where Pokemon would swarm and harass them by the dozen. Still, if this was the only way they could take.

Fortunately for the group, this cave didn't prove to be as catastrophic as the previous two: unlike Passage or Comet Cave, Rochfale Tunnel was just that, a tunnel. A rather long one that took them most of the day to cross, but there were no branching paths or divergent ways, so it was just walking in a straight line for most of the time.

The Pokemon inhabiting the tunnel, mostly Gligar and Modrille, mostly minded their own business and in the worst cases, they flew or scurried away wherever the group of humans came too close to them, something the group of teens were thankful for. All in all, the trek through Rochfale Tunnel was a dull and uneventful experience, but compared to their past treks through caves, the change was very much a welcomed one.

When they finally reached the tunnel's exit, the sun was starting to set. The group saw how the agreste forest of Pahar Hills was no more, instead replaced by a vast expanse of sand, dotted with clusters of palm trees.

"Hey look, a Pokemon Center!" Bonnie said, pointing out to the nearby building, conveniently located next to the tunnel's exit.

"That's a relief. I really wouldn't mind sleeping on a bed again," Clemont said.

"It's not that we'd have to sleep in the open for that long," Serena said, eyes on her tablet. "From this point on, there's only a day and a half of travel until we get to Bealbeach City!" she excitedly announced.

"About time!" Ash said. "It feels like it's been ages since the last time I had a Gym Battle!"

...

The very next day, after having a hearty meal at the Pokemon Center cafeteria, the group left the place and continued their journey north, towards Bealbeach City.

While Pahar Hills had a certain charm with its many shades of yellow, orange and red, the almost white sand and the many palm trees that give Tandor Sheets a tropical look was the preferred scenery for the group of four.

Naturally, the Pokemon that inhabited this land were also different. Gone were Tancoon, Owten and the Pahar that gave the name to Route 6, replaced by Pokemon more fitting for such a place, such as the Cocaran they had seen for the first time back in Seabreeze Way, some Corsola, and a few Cassnail.

And, as usual, it was time to stop for the afternoon. The group had lunch, accompanied by some coconut milk from the coconuts that grew on the palm trees common in the area. And once they were done, they would dedicate the afternoon to train, like they've been doing for quite some time now.

"Chespin and I are leaving!" Bonnie said, as she and Chespin went to find a decent spot to train, followed by Luxray.

"Good luck on your training with Chespin!" Serena said, as she began to walk away from the camp. "My Pokemon and I will be training a lot too. We need to get ready for the coming contest in Bealbeach City."

But today was going to be a little different. Ash took a deep breath, and walked towards the leaving blonde.

"Hey, Serena!" Ash called.

Serena stopped on her tracks, and turned towards Ash, looking at him expectantly. "Yes?"

"Say..." Ash began. He rubbed his arm as he tried to put his thoughts in order. While he was normally a master at thinking on his feet, he was lost when it didn't involve Pokemon battles. "I was wondering... given the good weather, and how nice this place looks... would you mind if we take a walk together?"

Serena let out a high pitched yelp, as her cheeks turned pink. She stammered a little, sounding as if she was going to agree, but she said: "I-I'm sorry, Ash. I'd love to, but my Pokemon and I have a lot of training to do..." she said, while averting her gaze, as if shame consumed her.

But Ash wasn't deterred. "Come on Serena, you have been working really hard for the past few days. Weren't you the one who always said that resting is important?"

Serena hesitated, shifting on her feet as if making such a decision was tearing her apart. Noticing this, Ash gave her a nudge.

"It can be a short walk. Then you can go and train," he added.

"Alright," Serena finally said, still sounding conflicted over shortening her training. Her Pokemon, however, breathed in relief and looked at Ash with hopeful eyes. "Guess I can take some time for a walk..."

"Great! Come on, I'm sure we can find somebody who sells some ice cream around here," Ash said, as he and Serena walked away.

...

A few moments later, Bonnie had found a good spot to train with Chespin, next to a small lake surrounded by tall palm trees that provided a nice and cool shade.

"Alright Chespin, ready to continue the training?" Bonnie asked.

"Ches..." Chespin nodded, as if saying "If I have to."

Bonnie smiled gently at him. "Hey, I know that this isn't easy on you, but I want you to know that I'm really proud of all the effort you're putting," she began. "And even if you progress at a slower pace than others, all of us still believe in you and think you're an important member of our team. Right guys?"

"Nene!" Dedenne agreed.

"Lux," Luxray softly growled.

Chespin spend a couple seconds looking at Bonnie, as her words slowly sink in. Then, his mouth slowly curved into a tiny smile, and nodded while looking at Bonnie with resolute eyes.

"Pin!" he cried.

"Great!" Bonnie said, as she held up the same old, large and beaten up pillow she used for training. "Let's continue where we left off! Come on, give me an Iron Head!"

And, focusing his power onto his head, Chespin headbutted the pillow.

...

As Bonnie trained with Chespin and Clemont watched over the camp and the rest of their Pokemon, Ash and Serena walked together. Like Bonnie, they also choose to walk close to the shade of the palm trees in order to be shielded from the sun. They could see the sea a few kilometers in the distance, but decided it wasn't worth going that far just for that.

They'd have plenty of sea to enjoy once they arrived at Bealbeach City.

"Ahh, isn't this great?" Ash said, taking a deep breath. "The scent of the sea in the air, the sun shining above us, wild Pokemon around us... it helps one to relax, doesn't it?"

"Indeed," Serena agreed, looking at her feet while she walked. "It's very soothing."

"I'm glad that you're enjoying this," Ash pointed out. Now that he broke the ice, he decided to press the issue forward. "Because it looked like you needed to relax a bit."

"I'm perfectly fine, Ash," Serena replied, her tone sounding a little snappy.

Ash suppressed a sigh. He already expected Serena to get defensive. Perhaps he should have been more subtle? Then again, subtlety wasn't his forte. Plus, that way he wouldn't waste any time dancing around the issue.

"Listen, I know I'm somebody who loves to throw himself into training. But even I know when to stop," Ash began. He ignored Serena rolling her eyes. "And honestly, the way you've been training recently... well, it's less training and more running your Pokemon into the ground. And yourself. Which was making us a little worried for you."

Serena stopped, and looked Ash in the eye. Ash could see a glint of anger in her eyes, but much to her surprise, she merely smiled at him. "Ash, I appreciate your concern. I really do. But you have nothing to worry about. My Pokemon and I are fine. I'm simply stepping up our game. I have to if I want to make it to the Grand Festival."

"Is this because of your last contest? Because you lost?" Ash asked. "Losing happens. Hell, this isn't even the first contest you lose."

"Of course it's not because I lost, Ash. I already learned to accept defeat way back in Kalos," Serena replied, crossing her arms.

"Then why? What happened in the last contest that caused you to train like that?" Ash insisted.

"Because I... nothing," she said, turning her back to Ash.

But Ash wasn't having any of it. "So it *is* something that happened in the last contest! What is it, Serena? What's going on? Come on, you can tell me."

"I said it's nothing," she insisted.

"And I don't believe you. I know you, Serena. There's something that's eating you on the inside. What is it?" Ash said.

"I already said it's nothing. Why must you be so persistent?" Serena asked, losing her patience a little.

Alright, time for a more direct approach. "Remember Winding Woods?"

This seemed to do the trick, given that Serena's body went stiff. Ash allowed himself a self-congratulatory smirk. He got her now.

"I was in a really bad place back then. And Wulfric was far from the first Gym Leader I lost against. But remember what I told you? It wasn't just Wulfric, but how I was unable to beat Alain, how I couldn't get Greninja's transformation under control, how Sawyer had surpassed me..." Ash said. He dared to place a hand on Serena's shoulder, who flinched upon being touched, but didn't swat his hand away. "Come on, you can tell me. Let me help you, the same way you wanted to help me back then."

Ash heard Serena sigh as her body slumped. She turned around, no longer smiling or angry, looking melancholic instead.

"Let's go find somewhere to sit down," Serena said.

Ash nodded, and after some minutes walking, they sat down on the trunk of a fallen palm tree. Ash waited for Serena to gather her thoughts and start speaking without pressuring her.

"Yes, it was because I lost the last contest, but it wasn't because of the loss itself," Serena began. "It was because I lost to Vitor."

"Why? Vitor is a pretty skilled coordinator. There's no shame in losing against him," Ash replied.

"No, but I'm more experienced than him. Maybe we started doing contests at the same time, but I had a whole year on him as a

Pokemon trainer," Serena continued. "Funny thing you mentioned Sawyer. I thought that I could be to Vitor what you were to Sawyer. Somebody whom I could help reach his full potential.

"And just like how Sawyer eventually got to your level, I was counting on Vitor to become my equal too, or even surpass me. But I wasn't expecting it to happen so soon! This was the third contest we did together, and the second contest we faced each other! Did he really need so little time to beat me?"

"Serena, just because somebody beats you once doesn't mean that they have surpassed you," Ash gently said.

"It's not just that, Ash," Serena replied. "I tend to think of my victory over Vitor back in Moki as a clean victory, but now I realized that it was a pretty narrow one. Vitor was never that far away from me. And now that he finally caught up to me... the distance between us is only going to get even bigger. That's why I need to push myself and my Pokemon harder.

"Then... I also remember Sayaka's words. About how I wasn't taking this seriously. What if she was right? Here I am, talking about having fun and making people smile, while everybody else works hard to improve themselves and carve a path to victory..."

Ash shook his head. "You know Serena, you could continue training like this until we get to the next contest, and you'd lose again," Ash said, unperturbed by Serena's gasp. "And do you know why?"

"... because my Pokemon would be too tired?" Serena guessed.

"That too, but that's not what I was thinking," Ash said, as his eyes fixed on the horizon. "Because that wouldn't be you, Serena. You aren't somebody who competes because you want to win at all costs. You're somebody who has fun by doing what you do, and transmit that feeling of fun to those watching you and rooting for you. Because when you are having fun, it's when the best of you comes

out. And watching you at your best... it's something that would make even the sourest people smile.

"Not to say that you shouldn't train! Of course training is important," Ash said, chuckling a little, before he returned his gaze towards Serena. "But to not lose sight of... Serena? Are you okay?"

Serena was looking at Ash with her eyes opened wide -and what appeared to be tears forming on them-, her lips pursed and trembling, and her previously pink cheeks had turned into a much deeper shade of red.

"It's... it's nothing, Ash," Serena squeaked in a comically high pitched tone.

"Are you sure? You look a little agitated," Ash observed.

"I'm fine! I'm fine!" She insisted, her voice lowering to her normal pitch. She then cleared her throat, and took a deep breath. "Yes... you are right, Ash. Now I realize it. I was so focused on not losing, that I ended up losing sight of my true goal. One mere defeat shouldn't have been enough to make me doubt myself so much."

"So, about your Pokemon...?"

"I think that after how hard I made them train, they earned a well deserved rest," Serena said. "Not to mention an apology,"

Ash smiled at her. "Great! Let's go back to the camp! I'm sure they'll enjoy it if we spend some quality time with them that doesn't involve training," Ash said, as he got up from the fallen tree.

"Wait!" Serena said, grabbing his arm. "Say... could we stay a little longer? It's really nice here," Serena said.

Ash smiled and sat down again. "Of course."

...

Sometime later, Ash and Serena returned to the camp. Once they were close, all of Serena's Pokemon quickly gathered around her without her having to call them. After a few days, they already knew the drill.

Today would prove to be different, though.

"Hey there, guys. I see you're ready to train," Serena noted. She rubbed her arm a little. "Though, after talking with Ash, he made me realize certain things and the way I've been behaving and... well, I decided that we could skip training today and instead play some games to have some fun and relax."

Needless to say, all her Pokemon cried in surprise, but also in happiness, something that didn't go unnoticed to the honey blonde.

"I worked you to the bone these past few days because of my mistaken belief that we weren't doing enough, when all of you have always done everything I asked you, and then some," she said. "So I'm really sorry for the way I treated you these past days. Will you forgive me?"

The answer came in the form of all her Pokemon throwing themselves at her for a hug.

"Hehe, I'd say that's a yes," Ash chuckled.

"So it seems," Serena giggled. "Though, if I ever behave like this ever again, don't be afraid to call me out, okay? If you're unhappy with the way I treat you, you shouldn't remain silent."

They all nodded in agreement.

...

This time, Bonnie decided to take it a bit easier. She had Chespin headbutt the pillow in his attempt to learn Iron Head. However, once

the Spiny Nut Pokemon appeared to lose his breath, she called for a break in order to let him rest.

Once Bonnie judged that Chespin had rested enough, they continued the training. She also began to move from one side to another, as Chespin continued to headbutt the pillow, since she had read on the Pokedex that it helped simulate the pace of a real Pokemon battle. This caused Bonnie to call for breaks a bit more often than when she stayed still.

And then, it happened.

"Come on Chespin, one more time!" Bonnie, sweating a little, said as he jumped from one side to another.

"Cheeees... !" Chespin began, as he got ready to headbutt the pillow. "Pin!"

As Chespin charged Bonnie, for a couple seconds, his head shell flickered with a silvery glow, not unlike Pikachu's tail when he used Iron Tail. And when Chespin's head smashed against the pillow, Bonnie was knocked on her butt from the sudden increase in the force compared to previous attempts.

"Ches!?" a concerned Chespin said, as he rushed to check on Bonnie.

"Lux?" Luxray asked, also getting back to his feet.

"I'm okay, I'm okay!" Bonnie reassured them, also getting back on her feet, and wiping out the sand from her clothes. Then, she looked at Chespin and beamed. "Chespin! Did you see that? You almost had it there!"

"Ches?" he asked, tilting his head.

"Your head turned all metal-like for a couple seconds! And that last headbutt was so whoaaaaa!" She excitedly said.

"Ches? Chespin, ches!" he cheered, as he began to excitedly bounce.

"Luxray," Luxray nodded at his teammate, as if congratulating him.

"See? All that effort paid off!" Bonnie excitedly said. "You haven't mastered the attack just yet, but you're on your way there! Come on, let's go back to Clemont and the others and show them!"

Fueled by the adrenaline provided by their breakthrough, Bonnie and Chespin rushed back towards their campsite, Luxray following behind at a steady pace. When Bonnie arrived, she saw that Ash and Serena were already back. While Ash and Clemont were talking to each other, Serena was playing with her Pokemon with a beach ball. It seemed that Ash managed to talk Serena out of her worrying training methods and let both herself and her Pokemon relax a little.

" *Heh, this day keeps getting better,*" she thought. "Hey guuuuuuuuys!"

The three teens and their Pokemon turned around to see Bonnie running towards them, with Chespin and Luxray behind.

"Hey Bonnie, back already?" Ash asked.

Bonnie stopped in front of them, and stopped a few seconds to catch her breath and wipe some sweat from her forehead.

"You look excited. Something happened?" Serena asked.

"You can bet it did!" Bonnie said, as she put some distance between herself and Chespin, holding the pillow in front of her. "Come on Chespin, Iron Head!"

Chespin nodded, and prepared to headbutt the pillow. As it happened before, Chespin's head shell glowed with a silvery light for a couple seconds before it hit the pillow. Unlike the previous attempt,

Bonnie was prepared and wasn't knocked backwards. Despite not being a complete move, this drew a gasp from the three teens.

Even their Pokemon were impressed, many of them cheering for Chespin -except Pancham, who just looked aside and muttered something that made it sound like it wasn't that great.

And no one was more surprised than Clemont.

"Did you... did you teach Chespin a new move?" Clemont asked, his mouth open wide, as he looked at Chespin as if it was a completely different Pokemon.

"He hasn't mastered it yet. But give him a couple days and he'll have it down," Bonnie proudly said, as he handed Chespin one of the last pokepuffs Serena had backed for him, which he accepted and ate with gusto.

"I still can't believe it. Chespin has never learned any new moves since I caught him, and has never shown any interest in training," Clemont said, his eyes still fixed on his Grass-type Pokemon. "How did you do it?"

Bonnie puffed her chest proudly. "Because I'm amazing, that's how!" she cheekily replied. "Say, are you going to train him now with the others?"

"I've always been willing to train Chespin. It's him who didn't want to," Clemont replied, but upon seeing Chespin growing a little upset, he added: "Then again, maybe I should have been a little more insistent before throwing the towel with him. If you were able to find a way to motivate him, then me, a Gym Leader, has no excuse.

"So sorry Chespin. Maybe I shouldn't have given up on you so easily just because training you proved to be a little harder than the others. You're welcome to train with me again, if you want to," Clemont said, looking at Chespin, who nodded.

"Awesome!" Bonnie cheered. "Now-"

Bonnie was interrupted by a loud, deep growl that rumbled across the area, causing many of the Pokemon wandering around there to run away in terror. All eyes were fixed on Ash.

"Don't look at me," Ash replied. "It wasn't my stomach."

"... it was mine," Bonnie, her face reddening, sheepishly admitted. "All that training with Chespin left me starving."

Clemont smiled gently at his sister. "In that case, let's have some dinner already. I think the two of you deserve it."

And as usual, Clemont's cooking left no one disappointed. And none of Chespin's past meals felt as tasty as the one he had that night.

Author's Note: A low key chapter, but after the trepidation of the last few chapters with Serena's contest and all the stuff with Garlikid, it was necessary. Especially since the story will kick into overdrive once the group reaches Bealbeach City the next chapter.

I think this is the first time I focus on Bonnie in this fic. With Squishy out of the picture, is kinda hard to write her other than being the comic relief. But here I saw an opportunity to flesh out a little her desire to be a trainer once she's old enough and focus on a part of her that doesn't involve laughs. It also gave me a chance to write a scene between Ash and Bonnie which I'm very proud of, given that these two don't interact much.

Also Chespin. I admit that I don't like Chespin much. He's easily my least favorite of all the mons of the Kalos gang, and I think it shows since he got the least focus of all of Clemont's Pokemon, both old and new . To the point that I even considered to make Clemont leave Chespin back at Prism Tower and take another Pokemon with him, maybe Heliolisk, but in the end I decided

against it since it would be too self-indulgent. So I decided to do the next best thing and give him some character development. So here it begins Chespin's journey to stop being an unfunny one-joke comic relief and becoming stronger and more reliable battler.

Then there's the Serena half of the episode, which as Ash had lampshaded, was like the Winding Woods episode only with their roles switched, and admittedly less angst. There's a reason as for why Serena is acting like this. Sure, her first journey taught her to accept defeat with dignity and grace, but here she has to contend with something she didn't have to in Kalos: challenging rivals.

Because while I think that Shauna, Nini and especially Miette are great *characters*, they're pretty poor *rivals*. Hell, whenever Serena lost a showase it was because of a mistake she made, like Fennekin tripping over a ribbon too long or not taking into account Eevee's stage fright, rather than a rival proving to be better. That wasn't something I enjoyed, so I gave Serena rivals that will force her to push past her limits. And what happened here is the result of that. Thankfully, with Ash's help, Serena will cope with this new situation much better in the future.

Thanks a lot to 61934, Chuck, Fox McCloud, Viroro-kun and hirowriter for reviewing last chapter, and special thanks to Viroro-kun for his job as betareader and his help in making this story so much better.

Hope you enjoyed the relative peace and quiet of this chapter, because things will be shaken up a lot from the next chapter inwards. Also, don't forget to leave a review with your thoughts on this chapter!

Double Beach Bashing

Chapter 23:

Double Beach Bash

It was a warm and beautiful day. The sun was shining bright in the sky, moving towards the highest spot as noon came closer. Normally, the group would make a stop soon to have lunch, but today they wouldn't have to eat in the open.

"Bealbeach City, at last!" Ash excitedly said upon seeing the city into the distance.

Everybody was happy to finally reach the city after such a lengthy trek from Rochfale Town. The group watched in awe at what was the most magnificent city they had seen so far: it was a rather busy metropolis like Nowtoch City, but even larger. There were many tall skyscrapers made of clear steel and light blue glass that extended into the sky. While streets were paved with concrete, there were also many rows of palm trees that lined them.

The path to the city was flanked by a row of palm trees on each side. As they walked, they could see to their right a large beach of white sand bustling with beachgoers, as well as the same Pokemon they had seen in Tandor Sheets.

As usual, a sign greeted them:

Welcome to Bealbeach City

Dude, this is like, the place to be, man

"According to this, Bealbeach City is the largest city in all of Tandor, both west and east," Serena began to read from her tablet, having pulled up a website of information on Tandor and its places of interest. "While it's mostly a tourist hotspot thanks to its many

beaches, it also houses the Ranger General HQ, the largest port of Tandor, and the largest department store."

Bonnie let out a whistle. "They like their big things in this city, don't they?"

"While most people here work in either the tourism or maritime industry, there also used to be many people who worked on the nuclear power..." Serena continued reading, as a realization dawned upon her. "... plant."

There was a moment of silence as all eyes fell on Clemont, who didn't say anything.

"Oh, right, I had forgotten. This is where we part ways with Clemont," Ash said, a little melancholic. He was used to saying goodbye to his traveling companions, but farewells often happened when the journey had come to an end, not when they weren't even halfway through it.

Clemont didn't appear to share the group's sadness. "Come on guys, don't make a big deal out of it. We knew this was going to happen. Plus, it's not that we can't see each other. We have the Pokegears, right?"

"I know. But it won't be the same without having you in person," Bonnie said, a little sad.

"While I don't know how much time I'm going to be working on the new plant, maybe it won't take too long and I can rejoin you guys. And if I'm not, I'll make sure to be there for your big moments, such as the Pokemon League or the Grand Festival," Clemont promised. "Come on, you guys being all sad is the last thing I want to see before I leave for the power plant."

There was a moment of silence, as one by one, the other three nodded.

"Alright. Let's make sure to make Clemont's last days with us memorable then," Ash said, even though his voice didn't carry most of his usual energy.

"Well said. Now let's go."

The group walked towards the city, the path flanked by a row of palm trees. Once they were in the city proper, they looked for directions towards the nearest Pokemon Center. After fifteen minutes of traversing the bustling city, the four teens and their Pokemon finally arrived at the Pokemon Center. It looked much bigger than the ones in other cities or towns, and upon crossing the automatic doors, they saw that the insides were also just as big. Something necessary, given that it also had far more people than usual.

"Hey look, it's Ash and Serena!" a voice said. A voice all of them had heard before.

The group looked in the direction of the voice, and they saw Natalie, Vitor and Theo sitting on a table, having some drinks. They quickly walked towards the Moki Town trio to greet them.

"I was wondering when you guys would show up," Natalie said. "I know we had a bit of a head start, but you guys took your sweet time."

"Oh, we weren't in a hurry," Serena replied.

"Have you been here for long?" Ash asked.

"A few days. Theo was even here when we arrived," Vitor pointed out.

"Yep! And in the meantime, I got myself a new badge!" Theo proudly said, puffing out his chest. "Had you guys arrived a few hours earlier, you would have seen me crushing Cali in an epic match!"

"Crushing? Epic match?" Natalie asked. "Dude, you barely beat her. Had your Orchynx not evolved mid battle, you wouldn't have beaten her last Pokemon."

"But I did!" Theo protested.

"Hey, some victories come from factors out of our control such as luck, but that doesn't make them any less genuine," Ash interceded. "Plus, Theo's Orchynx wouldn't have been able to evolve if Theo hadn't trained it, so it wasn't entirely luck."

"See? Even Ash agrees with me," Theo stated. Natalie merely rolled her eyes and crossed her arms.

"What about you, Nat? Did you beat the city's Gym Leader?" Ash asked.

"Not yet. I'm helping my brother prepare for the next contest. After that, I'll challenge her," Natalie said. "Then again, if Theo beat her, I'm not that worried about my chances."

"Hey, what's that supposed to mean!?" Theo angrily protested.

"Come on sis, don't needle Theo," Vitor said. "Ash is right, he won fair and square."

Natalie let out an overly dramatic gasp as she looked at Vitor with wide eyes. "Betrayed by my own flesh and blood... !"

Ignoring her sister, Vitor looked at Serena. "The Bealbeach City contest will be in a few days. I hope you're ready, Serena. The days where I lost to you are long past gone," he boasted.

"I'm glad to see you all fired up. But you shouldn't underestimate me just because you managed to beat me once," Serena fired back, though she kept a good natured tone.

Before the two rivals could trade more boasts, Nurse Joy's voice through the intercom announced that Theo's Pokemon had been

fully healed.

"At last!" Theo said, getting up and walking towards the counter, where an Aromatisse was placing his pokeballs on a tray. "Alright, time to head to the next city!"

"Wait, you're leaving already?" Clemont asked. "Ash plans to challenge the Gym Leader today. Don't you want to see his match?"

"Pffft, why should I? I already beat that Gym Leader, so I have nothing to see," Theo said, as he walked towards the counter. "Anyway, see ya later!"

"Pika..." Pikachu said, glaring at Theo.

"I thought that guy would be more appreciative of Ash after he helped him train," Clemont commented.

As the redheaded boy left, Serena looked at the twins. "What about you two? Since you plan to stay here a little longer, are you going to watch Ash's Gym Battle?"

"Sure thing! I still remember Ash's battle against Maria, and I still get goosebumps when I recall it! I wouldn't miss another match of Ash for anything in the world," Natalie excitedly said.

"After how much my sister here hyped Ash, I can't say no," Vitor added. "Though, I hope you don't mind waiting a little. Natalie and I plan to go to the Ranger HQ in order to see our dad, who just arrived from a mission."

"Oh, right! You said your father was the Head Ranger of Tandor, right?" Clemont asked.

"That's a pretty big job," Bonnie said.

"Indeed it is. We don't get many chances to see him in person, so now that we're here we aren't going to waste such a chance," Natalie said.

"We don't mind in the slightest," Ash said. "In fact, I need to have my Pokemon checked first. I want to make sure they're in top form before I face the Gym Leader."

"In that case, we better get going so you don't have to wait for us too long," Natalie said, as she got up from her seat, her brother mimicking her. "Should we meet at the entrance of the Gym in say, an hour?"

"Sounds like a plan," Serena said.

With that, the twins left, and Ash and his friends went to the counter to ask Nurse Joy to get their Pokemon checked up. After that, they got some drinks from a vending machine and returned to the table the twins and Theo had been sitting at, and made some small talk while they waited for the checkup to finish. However, before that could happen, a new voice drew their attention.

"Clemont! You're here at last!"

"Bun, bun!"

Everybody turned to the direction of the voice, and saw no other than Lilia walking towards them, a huge smile on her lips, and her Buneary trailing behind her.

"Lilia!" Clemont said, clumsily getting up to greet her, his mouth forming a goofy but sincere smile. "It's so great to see you!"

"Same!" she replied, her joy mirroring Clemont's. "We may have talked through video calls, but finally seeing you again in person... I was so happy when you told me you arrived today!"

"Of course you would," Bonnie muttered, as she grumpily crossed her arms.

Both Clemont and Lilia ignored her comment, before the latter addressed the rest of the group.

"I'm also glad to see the three of you as well. So, how are you finding Tandor?" Lilia asked.

"It's great so far. It has a lot of great Pokemon, we met a lot of amazing people, and the Gym Leaders are so challenging!" Ash gushed. "I'm so glad that we decided to accompany Clemont here."

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu agreed.

"Given that you're doing the Gym Badge challenge, have you faced the Bealbeach City leader yet?" Lilia asked.

"I was planning to challenge her as soon as my Pokemon had their checkup done," Ash replied.

"Great. Do you mind if I tag along? Clemont speaks wonders of your skill as a trainer, and I want to see it firsthand," Lilia said.

"Sure, the more the merrier," Ash said.

"Wait, I thought you were going to take Clemont to that power plant now," Bonnie pointed out.

"It's the afternoon. Between getting to the port and having a ship deliver us to the island, it will be nightfall by the time we'll get there," Lilia explained. "Clemont and I will leave for the power plant tomorrow morning."

"Good to know that you'll get to see at least one last gym battle from me before we part ways," Ash told Clemont.

"Yeah. Pity I won't get to see Serena winning a contest again," Clemont said, looking at the honey blonde, before he amended: "Until the Grand Festival, that's it!"

While they waited for the checkup to finish, the group told Lilia how their adventure through Tandor has been going so far, and all the events they had taken part in, such as Gym Battles, contests, and other events such as their clash against Team Omega or Garlikid.

...

Bealbeach City Gym

An hour later, the group headed towards Bealbeach City Gym, headed in the northernmost part of the city, close to the beaches. The walk there was lengthy, and for Ash it felt neverending -he hadn't had a gym battle since Burole, and the idea of finally facing another Gym Leader filled him with so much excitement, he couldn't stay still-. When they arrived, the twins were already there, waiting in front of the entrance. They appeared to be there for quite some time, since they looked a bit bored.

"Hey there!" Ash greeted them.

"At last!" Natalie said, letting out a groan of exasperation. "We thought you weren't going to come!"

"Oh, did we make you wait too long?" Ash asked. "Sorry, we thought you'd want to spend more time with your dad."

"I imagine he was very happy to see you two," Serena said, smiling earnestly.

"Yeah... he was," Vitor said, rather unconvincingly.

"Shall we go inside?" Natalie suggested, sounding just as uncomfortable.

The group traded worried looks, but silently decided not to probe any further, and agreed to enter the Gym. As they entered, Clemont introduced Lilia and the twins to each other, and the three exchanged quick greetings. The lobby of the gym was similar to Nowtoch City's, being a simple room with a desk. Sitting on that desk, a bored looking man slowly typed on a computer.

"Hello there!" Ash greeted with his usual enthusiasm. "My name's Ash Ketchum, and I'm here to challenge the Gym Leader."

"A challenger?" the receptionist said in a bored tone that matched his expression. "Wait a minute. I'll go tell Cali."

As the man left his desk and disappeared behind a nearby door, Ash began to look around the place, and saw something that caught his interest: resting against a wall, there was a glass cabinet filled to the brim with all kinds of trophies.

"Whoa, look at those many trophies!" Ash said, as he rushed towards the cabinet in order to see them better. "This Gym Leader must be an absolute-oh..."

Curious by Ash's sudden disappointment, Serena went to check the cabinet, and immediately understood: turns out most of those trophies weren't of Pokemon tournaments (though there were a couple of those as well), as Ash had probably imagined, but of surfing competitions instead.

"This Cali really likes surf, doesn't she?" Serena pointed out.

"Surf is a pretty popular sport around this part of the region for obvious reasons," Vitor pointed out.

"Indeed she does. Aside from being the city's Gym Leader, Miss Cali is also a surfing instructor and lifeguard trainer," the receptionist said, having just returned from the same door he had left through only a few seconds ago. "I already warned Miss Cali, and she's ready to take your challenge, so if you'd be so kind as to follow me, I'll take you to the battleground."

They all followed the receptionist into the Gym. As they walked, they could see opened doors to large rooms with swimming pools in them. In some, people trained with their Water-type Pokemon, while in others, they swam from one side of the pool to another as a coach yelled at them. And after a couple twists and turns, they finally arrived at the battleground.

"Whoaaaaa..." almost everybody in the group chorused.

The battleground was a very large pool, similar to those used by Gym Leaders specialized in Water-type Pokemon. This one, however, wasn't a mere pool with a couple islets: the two shorter sides were covered in sand. The islets on the water were also covered in sand, and the largest one in the middle had a couple palm trees on it. All in all, it looked less like a pool and more like an artificial beach with two shorelines.

"Hello there!"

The group turned towards the direction of the voice, and saw a woman walking towards them. She was a young adult, probably no older than twenty. She had spiky blue hair tied in a large ponytail, eyes of the same color, and a very toned body that the newcomers could appreciate thanks to the fact that she was wearing nothing but a dark blue bikini, sandals of the same color, and a bracelet around her left wrist which had some small pearls attached to it.

"Welcome to my Gym! My name's Cali, and I'm the boss here!" the woman, Cali, introduced herself. "Now, which one of you is Ash Ketchum?"

Ash wordlessly raised his hand.

"Great! Get to one side of the battleground, the rest of your friends can watch from the bleachers!" Cali instructed. "Maria and Davern spoke very highly of you, so I hope you meet my expectations!"

"I'll try my best," Ash replied.

"You better. Gotta say, I wasn't expecting you to challenge me so soon. Bealbeach isn't exactly close to Burole. I thought you would have challenged the Amatrete or Vinoville Gyms first," Cali observed.

"I know. But a friend of mine had to come here for a job, so I decided to follow the same route as him," Ash said. "By the way, I saw your trophy collection in the lobby. I'm not much into surfing, but it was quite impressive."

"Thanks! Not many people point that out, since most of my challengers care more about Pokemon tournaments," Cali smiled proudly. "Not that I can blame them. Though, I hope you noticed that I also have a few trophies from such tournaments."

"I did!" Ash replied, before looking at the battleground. "So, seeing this, plus your passion for surfing, I take you're a Water-type specialist?"

"Close, but no. My team includes any Pokemon that can be found on a beach, my favorite place in the world," Cali explained. "Most of them are Water-type, others aren't, and if you think you're going to solo our battle with that Pikachu alone, you might have another thing coming."

"I would never dream of that," Ash said. He was about to say he never did such a thing, when the battle with Wattson came to mind. No wonder the poor guy contemplated retirement after that. Not that Ash wanted for such an outcome, especially since it was an accident that led to such a result.

"Good. Now..." Cali nodded at the referee, who nodded back at her.

The referee raised both her flags. "This is an official Gym Battle between the Gym Leader Cali, and Ash Ketchum. The battle will be a doubles format with no time limit, and each trainer will use up to four Pokemon. The battle will be over when one side has no more Pokemon remaining. Only the challenger may make substitutions. Trainers, select your first two Pokemon."

"Aveden, Colarva, I choose you!" Ash said, tossing the two pokeball forward.

From a mass of light, his blue bird Pokemon and spiky ice bug emerge, Colarva landing on the sand, Aveden hovering over him, the two of them standing ready for the battle.

"Alright Colarva, I know that this is your first Gym battle, but I trust you'll do great!" Ash said. "Work alongside Aveden, and everything will be fine!"

"Co, colarva!" Colarva cried in agreement, before looking at Aveden. The two Pokemon nodded at each other, ready to give their all.

"Interesting first choice. Let's see what you think about mine," Cali unclipped two pokeballs from her bikini top. "Corsoreef, Tubareel, surfs up!"

...

Serena saw the two pokeballs opening up, releasing Cali's first two picks, both of them landing on the water with twin splashes: one of them looked like a Corsola, only larger, with a collar of rocks around its neck, and barnacle-shaped growths running across its back. The second looked like a Tubjaw, only bigger and much longer. Probably an evolution. If Aisha's Tubjaw proved to be such a strong opponent, Serena shivered upon wondering what its evolved form could do.

Several Pokedex were already up to scan Cali's Pokemon.

" Corsoreef, the Coral Pokemon, and Corsola's evolution. Water/Rock. Their bodies are a host to a wide variety of other species. In return for a home, they give them the ability to inflict status effects on its foes. "

" Tubareel, the Jaws Pokemon, and Tubjaw's evolution. Water/Dark. A fierce, deep-sea hunter, this Pokémon is particularly vengeful towards humankind and will tear up fishing nets ."

"I wasn't aware Corsola had an evolution," Lilia pointed out.

"Most don't, but those who live in Tandor do," Natalie replied.

"I better keep an eye on that Tubareel. Aisha's Tubjaw might be one by the next time I face her," Serena said mostly to herself.

"Now, before we begin," Cali said, holding a remote in her hand, before pressing a button on it. Serena wondered where she got it from, given that Cali didn't have it a few seconds ago and that bikini didn't have pockets.

With a loud, slow groan, the roof began to fold back, allowing the sunlight to pour unimpeded, illuminating the whole battlefield.

"You can't have a beach indoors, don't you think?" Cali said, taking a deep breath. "Ah, nothing like feeling the sea breeze filling my lungs to get me into a mood for a Pokemon Battle!"

The referee then raised both flags. "Let the battle begin!"

~Challenger Ash (Aveden & Colarva, ?, ?) VS Gym Leader Cali (Corsoreef & Tubareel, ?, ?)~

"We'll be taking the first move! Aveden, Mirror Shot on Corsoreef! Colarva, Signal Beam on Tubareel!" Ash commanded.

"Ave!"

"Co!"

"Tubareel, Corsoreef, dodge them by diving underwater!" Cali commanded.

Both Pokemon opened their mouths -or beak in Aveden's case- and fired beams of energy, the first one greenish gray, the second rainbow colored. However, both attacks sailed above the two Water-type Pokemon as they quickly took cover under the water surface.

"Now Corsoreef, Rock Slide!" Cali ordered.

"Cooooor..." Corsoreef cried, as it summoned a multitude of boulders floating above its opponents. Letting gravity take hold of them, the large rocks pummeled down.

Aveden and Colarva began to frantically move around from one place to another in order to avoid the super effective move before they could be flattened. Just like Cali was expecting.

"Now Tubareel, Aqua Jet on Aveden!" Cali shouted.

"Aveden, try to dodge it!" Ash said.

Just as the Rock Slide reached its end, Tubareel burst out of the pool, as a cloak of water covered its long body, before it slammed against the Bliss Bird Pokemon, who was unable to move in time. Aveden let out a pained squak as he was pushed backwards.

"Great! Now follow up with Ice Beam, Corsoreef!" Cali followed up.

Everybody braced for the worst as Corsoreef opened its mouth, firing a stream of chilly white energy towards the reeling bird.

"Aveden-" Ash began.

"LARVA!" Colarva shouted as he jumped into the beam's trajectory. Everybody gasped as the Snow Mite Pokemon took the attack in full, but the damage he took was nothing compared to what it would have done to Aveden.

"Ave?" Aveden asked, almost surprised to see Colarva protecting him like that.

"Colarva, are you okay?" Ash asked, a little worried.

After shaking the frost off of his body, Colarva turned towards Ash, and raised one of its legs. "Co, co!"

"The little guy is brave, I won't deny you that," Cali said. "But bravery alone won't bring you victory! Corsoreef, Rock Slide again!"

"Oh no, not again! Aveden, counter that attack with Mirror Shot!" Ash commanded. "Colarva, String Shot on Corsoreef!"

As Corsoreef summoned again another salvo of rocks, Aveden fired from his beak another greenish gray beam of energy towards them, destroying the projectiles as they appeared. Meanwhile, Colarva shot a string of webs at Corsoreef, leaving the Coral Pokemon entangled in a sticky mess.

"Reef!" Corsoreef cried as it tried to break free.

"Now, Colarva, pull it out of the water!" Ash commanded. "And Aveden, Mirror Shot against it again!"

"Tubareel, cut that String Shot with Crunch!" Cali ordered.

As the Snow Mite Pokemon pulled with a mighty heave, he launched the wailing Corsoreef into the air, just as Aveden prepared to fire yet another Mirror Shot. However, that moment Tubareel jumped out of the water, its green teeth glowing purple, before its jaws closed around the string, easily snapping it and releasing Corsoreef. Unfortunately, that put it into the way of Aveden's attack.

"REEL!" Tubareel cried as the Mirror Shot hit against its body, blasting it into the air.

"Colarva, quick, use Signal Beam before it falls back into the water!" Ash commanded. His words barely left his lips as Colarva prepared the attack.

"Corsoreef, Bubble Beam on that bug!" Cali said.

Colarva fired yet another rainbow-colored beam towards the hapless Tubareel, while Corsoreef blew a stream of bubbles towards the Snow Mite Pokemon. The Signal Beam hit first, making the Jaws Pokemon cry in pain. However, before the Bubble Beam could hit Colarva, Aveden swooped in and caught the ice bug between his talons, lifting him into the air and out of harm's way.

"What!?" Cali asked, miffed.

"Man, Ash's Pokemon have such amazing teamwork! He doesn't even need to tell them to act in order to help each other!" Vitor gushed.

However, noble as it was, Cali realized she could take advantage of such a gesture.

"Tubareel, Aqua Jet against the two of them!" Cali ordered.

Badly bruised but still able to fight, Tubareel rocketed out of the pool surrounded by a roaring cloak of water. Once again, Aveden found himself unable to dodge while carrying the additional cargo, and took the attack in full. Both he and Colarva crashed down against the sandy ground.

"No!" Ash cried. "Quick, move out before-"

"Now we have them where we wanted to! Corsoreef, Rock Slide!" Cali said, throwing a punch forward. "We'll knock two birds out with one stone! Or a bird and a bug with lots and lots of stones."

Colarva was the first to get back on his many feet, but Aveden, being more dazed from taking that Aqua Jet, took longer. Shadows blocking the sunlight warned Colarva of the rocks forming above him and Aveden.

"Colarva, Aveden, get out of there!" Ash warned them.

While it was unlikely that Aveden could move out of there in time, Colarva could, but chose not to. Instead, he stood in front of his partner protectively, glaring at the floating rocks.

"Like I said, your little Colarva is very brave. But bravery without power is nothing but foolishness!" Cali brutally declared.

The rocks went down, ready to bury both of Ash's Pokemon alive. Everybody gasped in horror. Colarva cried, and closed his eyes. The rocks hit.

"WHAT!?"

But the Rock Slide never touched either of Ash's Pokemon, as just before they could, Colarva's body flashed for a second, and both he and Aveden were encased inside a green energy bubble, which disappeared after the attack was over.

"Look at that! Colarva learned Protect!" Bonnie cheered.

"Well, that was pretty lucky for Ash," Lilia said.

Clemont, however, shook his head. "I don't think it was just luck. Colarva's strong desire to protect Aveden must have allowed him to learn that move."

"Aveden, quickly, Gust into the water!" Ash commanded.

"Ave!" Aveden cawed, and having shook off the dizziness, he took flight and began to flap his wings furiously, forming a tornado that began to vacuum the water of the pool into a vortex of water, and Cali's Pokemon on it.

And while Corsoreef was able to swim against the current, Tubareel was too tired and beaten to do so, and was sucked in.

"Tubareel get out of there!" Cali cried.

"Now, Colarva, Signal Beam!" Ash ordered.

Once again, Colarva fired another rainbow colored beam at the defenseless Tubareel, blasting it out of the watery tornado. It landed painfully on the large central islet, its jaws opened wide and its eyes looking swirly.

The judge raised a flag in Ash's direction. "Tubareel can't fight anymore!"

This was followed by a chorus of cheers from the stands, as all celebrated that Ash was ahead.

"Yes! Great job guys!" Ash told Aveden and Colarva. "Now let's keep-"

However, Ash was interrupted by crackling noise, as Colarva's whole body glowed with a bluish white light, before it began to change shape, eliciting a gasp from the watching crowd.

"Look, Colarva is evolving!" Bonnie excitedly said.

As the evolution finished, a new Pokemon stood in Colarva's place: it looked like a cocoon made of either ice or crystal, with only a single insect orange head with curved blue antennae on its top.

Several people pulled their Pokedex out in order to scan this new Pokemon.

"Frosulo, the Ice Crystal Pokemon, and Colarva's evolution. Bug/Ice. It encases itself in a hard shell of unmelting ice and hangs upside-down from the ceilings of Lanthanite Cave, awaiting evolution," every Pokedex said.

"Lanthanite Cave? Is that Frosulo's natural habitat?" Clemont asked.

"I guess so. It's on the northernmost part of East Tandor," Natalie explained. "Very dangerous place to go."

Frosulo turned around, and happily hopped towards Ash, before knocking the Pallet Town trainer with an affectionate tackle, and started to rub his head against Ash, leaving frost all over his body.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm really happy that you evolved! But let's leave the celebrations for later, we have a badge to win!" Ash said, as he gently pushed Frosulo off him, and wiped the frost that the Ice Crystal Pokemon had smeared across his clothes.

"That's quite the Pokemon you got there, Ash, not only learning a new move in the heat of the battle, but evolving afterwards," Cali praised, as she returned her defeated Tubareel and unclipped

another pokeball from her bikini bottom. "But don't think that just because you beat one of my Pokemon I'm going down! Cararalm, surf's up!"

The third of Cali's Pokemon was released from its pokeball, landing on the large central islet, one that reminded Serena of Cocaran. Its main body was a large, sandy colored pineapple with four leaves on the top, six green legs ending in little brown feet sprouting at the bottom, a sandy colored head with two black eyes on green eyestalks, and green and brown pincers, which clacked menacingly.

"Ra, ra!" it cried.

Once again, people who hadn't seen this Pokemon scanned it with their Pokedex.

" Cararalm, the Palm Tree Pokemon, and Cocaran's evolution. Grass/Ground. Unlike their preevolutions, Cararalm cannot swim, so they stay on land. The height of their palm tree indicates how close they are to evolving," the Pokedex explained.

"The battle continues!" the referee declared.

"Corsoreef, out of the water and meet with Cararalm! We'll fight this battle on dry land!" Cali ordered.

"Aveden, grab Frosulo and get to that island!" Ash commanded.

"Den!" Aveden cawed, and did what was asked, grabbing Frosulo with his talons, and ferrying him to the large sand-covered landmass in the middle of the pool, dropping him as soon as there was ground beneath them.

"Corsoreef, Ice Beam! And Cararalm, Rock Tomb!" Cali ordered.

"Aveden, stay next to Frosulo, and Frosulo, use Protect!" Ash replied.

As Corsoreef fired yet another icy beam from its mouth and Cararalm summoned a series of large boulders above Aveden and Frosulo, Frosulo's eyes flashed as yet another energy bubble encased him and his partner, protecting them from the onslaught of supereffective attacks.

"Well done! Now it's our turn to attack! Aveden, Air Cutter, and Frosulo, Powder Snow! Focus on Cararalm!" Ash commanded.

"Corsoreef, protect Cararalm!" Cali ordered. "And Cararalm, Shell Smash!"

Mimicking what Colarva had done for Aveden not long ago, Corsoreef planted itself in front of Cararalm, taking the blades of compressed air fired by Aveden and the chilly wind blown by Frosulo. Its type meant it would take less damage than its partner, but it still hurt. Meanwhile, Cararam's body flashed white for a second, followed by a cracking noise.

"Well done! Now Corsoreef, follow with Recover, and Cararalm, Thunder Punch on Aveden!" Cali said. Corsoreef's body flashed with a green aura, as its wounds and bruises slowly disappeared, while Cararalm dashed forward, one of its claws crackling with electricity.

"Aveden, Frosulo, Air Cutter and Powder Snow on Cararalm again! Corsoreef won't be able to protect it while it uses Recover!" Ash surmised.

However, thanks to Shell Smash, Cararalm's speed was much higher than before and allowed it to dodge the incoming attacks with ease. It then jumped towards Aveden and smashed its electrified pincer into him before the bird could fly away. Aveden cawed in pain before falling to the water with a large splash.

His body floated on the surface, but made no attempt to fly or even move. The referee raised a flag, this time in Cali's direction.

"Aveden can't fight anymore!" she declared.

Ash didn't say anything, only sighing before recalling his trusty bird and whispering words of encouragement. His hand grabbed another pokeball, and tossed it forwards.

"Orchynx, I choose you!"

The Grass and Steel-type feline materialized on the sandy ground. Orchynx was also another Pokemon that hadn't taken part in any Gym battle before now. It seemed that Ash was trying to stop relying so much on his veterans and give his beginners a chance to shine. Since it worked with Frosulo, Serena imagined that Ash was trusting Orchynx to yield a similar result.

"The battle continues!" the referee declared.

"Cararalm, Crush Claw on Frosulo! Corsoreef, Rock Slide!" Cali ordered.

"Frosulo, counter with Shadow Claw! And Orchynx, use Iron Tail on the rocks!"

Cararalm dashed towards Frosulo, leaving a trail of sand clouds behind it, one of its pincers glowing blood red as it prepared to crush the Ice Crystal Pokemon with it, while boulders began to appear above him and Orchynx. Serena realized that, while Colarva knew Shadow Claw, could Frosulo still use it now that he had no arms?

The answer came in the form of a shadow arm ending in a hand with claw-like fingers manifesting to one side of Frosulo's ice chrysalis, which he used to parry the incoming Crush Claw, pushing Cararalm tumbling backwards, while Orchynx protected the frozen bug by shattering the falling rocks with Iron Tail.

"Our turn to attack! Orchynx, Energy Ball on Cararalm, before it can recover!" Ash urged. "Frosulo, you use Signal Beam!"

"Cararalm, use Dig to dodge! And Corsoreef, Ice Beam on Orchynx!" Cali ordered.

Cararalm quickly burrowed underground, the two attacks sailing past him, while Corsoreef fired another white beam of chilling energy at the Kitten Pokemon. Orchynx, however, managed to nimbly move sideways, avoiding the enemy's move.

"Big mistake, Cali! Orchynx, use Iron Tail on the ground! Put as much force into it as you can!" Ash called.

"Chynx!" Orchynx meowed in agreement, as she jumped into the air, her tail turning stiff and glowing with a silvery sheen.

"What is Ash planning to do?" Lilia asked.

"His counter to Dig. Watch carefully," Clemont told the glasses-wearing girl. No doubt Clemont was recalling the time Ash used such a tactic against his Bunnelby.

Orchynx's tail smashed against the ground, resulting in an explosion of sand that launched sand everywhere, and, most importantly, Cararalm being launched into the air.

"What!?" Cali shouted.

"Whoa, that's so clever!" Vitor gushed. "I need to keep that in mind for the next time somebody uses Dig against me!"

"Frosulo, now's your chance! Powder Snow!" Ash ordered.

Frosulo took a deep breath, and exhaled a gust of cold wind with snow crystals towards the hapless Palm Tree Pokemon. The supereffective attack struck, covering Cararalm in snow as it landed painfully back on the ground with a loud thud.

"Yes! Now, Signal Beam and Energy Ball, quick!" Ash said, pressing the advantage.

"Corsoreef, protect Cararalm! Endure the attacks and use Recover!" Cali ordered.

Corsoreef nodded, and jumped in front of its partner, getting in the way of the attacks as it preemptively used Recover. The two attacks struck, but thanks to Recover the Coral Pokemon resisted. Then again, it was obvious that that Energy Ball had chipped away more health than Recover had restored.

"Now's our chance! Metal Claw on Corsoreef before it uses Recover again!" Ash said.

"Cararalm, parry that attack with Leaf Blade!" Cali ordered.

"Oh no, you won't! Frosulo, String Shot on Cararalm!" Ash added.

Orchynx dashed towards the pained and panting Corsoreef, her front claws extending and glowing with a gray metallic light, while Cararalm dashed to intercept her, one of its pincers glowing green. However, before Cararalm could reach her, it was covered by a sticky thread that slowed it down considerably, leaving Orchynx free way to her foe.

"Or-CHYNX!" the Kitten Pokemon meowed as she slashed Corsoreef across her body.

"Cooooooo... !" Corsoreef cried in pain as it slumped and fell to the ground.

The judge raised a flag in Ash's direction. "Corsoreef can't fight anymore!"

"Thank you, partner. Take a good rest," Cali said, as she recalled her Corsoreef. She then unclipped the pokeball of her final Pokemon.

"Yes! With the damage it has already taken, Cararalm is almost down, leaving Cali with just one Pokemon!" Bonnie cheered.

"And Ash still has to use his final Pokemon," Natalie said. "I hope it's Greninja. Last time I didn't get to see that transformation thingie he can do."

"True, Ash has the advantage now, but he shouldn't underestimate Cali," Clemont observed. "If we go by what we saw with Maria and Davern, she saved her powerhouse for last."

"You are proving to be quite the tough cookie to crack, Ash. No wonder Maria and Davern praised you so much," Cali said, tossing the pokeball forward. "However, I left the best for last! Let's see how well you do against this one! Gyarados, surf's up!"

The Atrocious Pokemon materialized in the middle of the central island, letting out a terrifying roar upon appearing.

"WHOA!" Natalie gasped. "Cali didn't use that against Theo!"

"Of course she didn't. Gym Leaders don't go all out against beginners. Theo only had two badges when he fought her, right?" Clemont asked.

"Ash might only have two badges, but he's a veteran of multiple leagues," Serena continued. "The Gym Leaders know this, so they don't hold back."

"Hey Clemont," Lilia said, narrowing her eyes at Gyarados. Serena followed Lilia's gaze, and saw that there was something attached to Gyarados' frontal crest, which gleamed under the sunlight. "Is that...?"

"A Mega Stone," he finished. "Given what we saw from other Gym Leaders, this is hardly a surprise."

"You know, Mega Evolution is big in Tandor," Bonnie said.

"The battle continues!" the referee declared, resuming the battle.

Cali wasted no time and issued an order as soon as the battle officially resumed. "Cararalm, Dig! Gyarados, Flamethrower in a wide arc! Make sure you hit the two of them!"

Her two Pokemon obeyed, with Cararalm quickly burrowing underground, and Gyarados releasing a fiery torrent of orange flames from its mouth.

"Frosulo, Protect! Orchynx, keep close to Frosulo and wait for Cararalm's attack!" Ash ordered.

Once again, Frosulo encased himself and his partner inside a green energy bubble as the Flamethrower hit, setting on fire one of the palm trees it had grazed, and burning the sand around them into glass. However, the Protect held.

However, the moment Flamethrower and Protect finished, Cararalm burst from below, sending both of Ash's Pokemon tumbling into different directions.

"Grab Frosulo with Crush Claw!" Cali ordered.

"Ralm!" Cararalm cried, one of its pincers glowing blood red and growing in size, before it closed around Frosulo's frozen body. Though, no matter how hard Cararalm closed its pincer, Frosulo's ice body didn't crack.

Too bad that wasn't a factor in Cali's strategy.

"Now, throw him against Gyarados, and Gyarados, Aqua Tail!" Cali shouted, throwing an arm forward.

"Orchynx, stop them-"

"FROOOOOOOO!" Frosulo wailed as he sailed through the air.

But Orchynx was too late to stop Cararalm from throwing the Ice Crystal Pokemon towards Gyarados, whose tail was already raised and covered in a watery cloak. And as soon as he was within striking distance, Gyarados smashed Frosulo with its tail, producing an explosion of water that sent the Bug-type Pokemon flying against

one of the palm trees, hitting against it with such force, the poor tree was toppled down.

Needless to say, Frosulo was in no condition to keep fighting after such a brutal combo, something the referee was quick to note.

"Thank you Frosulo, you did your best," Ash gently said, recalling his downed Pokemon, before looking at Pikachu. "Alright buddy, it's up to you and Orchynx!"

"Pikapi!" Pikachu nodded, happy to be chosen, before he jumped towards the central island, joining Orchynx.

"Aw, you aren't going to use Greninja against me?" Cali whined, pouting a little. "After hearing such great things from Maria and Davern..."

"I don't need Greninja to win all my battles. The rest of my Pokemon are just as capable!" Ash boldly declared.

This got an approving smile out of Cali. "At the very least, you are not a one trick Ponyta who relies on one Pokemon. Oh well, guess that if I want to see that Greninja in action, I'll have to force you to bring him out during the rematch!"

"Rematch that won't happen!" Ash replied. "Pikachu, Thunderbolt on Gyarados! Orchynx, Energy Ball on Cararalm!"

"Cararalm, intercept that Thunderbolt, and deflect that Energy Ball with Crush Claw!" Cali ordered.

Cararalm quickly jumped in the way of the Thunderbolt, letting the electric attack harmlessly strike the Palm Tree Pokemon, as it shattered the coming Energy Ball with one of its red glowing pincers.

"Well done! Gyarados, Twister!" Cali shouted.

Gyarados waved its tail as if it was a fan, creating a tornado of blue and purple wind that moved towards Pikachu and Orchynx, raising

clouds of sand as it moved.

"Pikachu, Orchynx, move in opposite directions!" Ash commanded.

The mouse and cat duo cried in agreement, and went around the opposite edges of the islet, letting the Twister pass between them. It seemed that was what Cali's Pokemon expected, as Gyarados moved to face Orchynx while Cararalm prepared to intercept Pikachu.

"Time to end this! Gyarados, fry that cat with Flamethrower! And Cararalm, Crush Claw on Pikachu!" Cali said.

That moment, Serena could see Ash's eyes sparkle with a glint of brilliance, as if an idea had dawned upon him. "Orchynx, quickly move around to dodge! Pikachu, parry that Crush Claw with Iron Tail!"

As Gyarados harassed the running Orchynx with streams of burning flames, Pikachu used his glowing tail to intercept the Crush Claw. Cararalm's pincers closed around Pikachu's metallic limb, but it didn't break.

"Great! Make sure you keep Pikachu in place while Gyarados finishes Orchynx off!" Cali said.

"Pikachu, spin Cararalm around!" Ash said.

This drew a chorus of gasps from everybody watching, Cali included, given that there was no way Pikachu could drag a larger Pokemon. But Ash's voice radiated such confidence, as if everything was going according to his plan.

"Piiiiiiii-KA!"

The Mouse Pokemon's tiny paws gripped the sandy ground, anchoring him to it, and even if it took Pikachu a great effort, he managed to use his tail to lift the surprised Cararalm off of the

ground as he began to spin in place with Cararalm, as if preparing to launch it away.

"How... how can Pikachu lift that Cararalm!?" Natalie asked. "I know that Pikachu is stronger than he looks, but still... !"

"The Shell Smash," it was Lilia who talked. "Shell Smash makes a Pokemon much faster at the expense of making it more fragile. However, in order to become faster, the Pokemon becomes much lighter as well."

"So Ash is using Cararalm's move against it!" Natalie said, amazed.

"Whoa, that's so clever! I don't think I would have been able to come up with something so ingenious," Vitor said.

"Trust me, with time and experience, you will," Serena assured him, placing a hand on his shoulder.

Back on the battlefield, Pikachu's spinning had picked up so much momentum, a small tornado of sand was forming around him.

"Now, launch Cararalm against Gyarados!" Ash ordered.

"PikaaaaaaaCHU!" Pikachu yelled, his spinning coming to a sudden stop so Cararalm was lined up with Gyarados, and letting the centrifugal force launch the Palm Tree Pokemon, who could no longer hold onto Pikachu's tail, against its Water-type partner.

"Raaaaaaaaaaa!" Cararalm cried, sailing through the air, before it smashed against Gyarados's face, bouncing against it and falling back on the sandy ground.

And much to Cali's horror, Ash's tactic worked even better than he anticipated, since the sudden attack caused Gyarados to react in blind anger by turning towards Cararalm and scorch the poor Pokemon with a Flamethrower. Gyarados realized in horror that it

was its partner and not an enemy it was attacking and canceled the move, but the harm was already done.

"Orchynx, X-Scissor on Cararalm!" Ash ordered.

"Or!" Orchynx leaped into the air, her claws glowing greenish yellow, and slashed an X into Cararalm at point blank, blasting the Grass and Ground-type Pokemon backwards.

"Cararalm!" Cali cried in concern. "Cararalm, are you okay?"

Cararalm tried to get back on its feet, but was unable to and collapsed, unable to hold onto consciousness.

The referee raised a flag in Ash's direction. "Cararalm can't fight any longer!"

"Yes! One more Pokemon, and Ash will win!" Serena cheered.

"And it's not only two versus one, but both Pikachu and Orchynx have type advantage over Gyarados!" Bonnie added, just as excited. "Ash has already won!"

"Don't be so sure. Remember that Cali still has one last ace in the hole," Clemont reminded his female companions.

And indeed, as Cali raised her left arm, they could see that one of the "pearls" attached to it wasn't a pearl, but a Keystone.

"Congratulations, Ash. You didn't even use Greninja, yet you pushed me to use this. I don't know if feeling happy for being able to go all out, or mad that you made me use my last resort," Cali said, as she touched the Keystone. Both it and the Mega Stone attached to Gyarados' head began to glow. "Listen to my voice, Gyarados! Let our hearts become one, so the waves of your power gather and form a tsunami! Mega Evolve!"

Even those who had already seen a Pokemon Mega Evolve couldn't help but stare in awe as beams of energy shot from both the

Keystone and Mega Stone, clashing against each other, linking trainer and Pokemon, causing the latter to transform. Gyarados' body glowed bright as it transformed into a bigger and more fish-like form, the metamorphosis finished by a helix symbol flashing for a second over Gyarados.

"You think you intimidate us? This is far from the first Mega Evolved Pokemon we have faced!" Ash said, his voice full of resolve.

"In that case, you should be more than familiar with their immense power," Cali said, sounding confident. "Gyarados, Flamethrower!"

The Mega Evolved Pokemon opened its large mouth, releasing yet another fiery torrent of flames. However, this one was wider in scope, and burned so hot it caused the air around it to ripple. Ash didn't need to tell his Pokemon to run away to avoid the incoming inferno.

"Pikachu, Thunderbolt! Orchynx, Energy Ball!" Ash ordered.

"Or-CHYNX!"

"PikaaaaaaaCHUUUUUUU!"

Orchynx fired an orb of green energy as Pikachu released a yellow lightning bolt from his body, the two attacks flying towards Gyarados. Cali, however, looked far from worried.

"Counter it with Twister!" Cali replied.

Gyarados roared, and rather than waving its tail, it began to flap the wing-like fins on the sides of its body, raising a tornado of blue and purple wind in front of him, much larger than the one it had created before Mega Evolving. The three attacks clashed, resulting in an explosion of smoke and sand, but nothing suggested that the mouse and cat's respective moves had reached the Atrocious Pokemon.

"Gyarados, Waterfall!" Cali ordered.

Gyarados roared once again, and all the water surrounding the islet became rough as if it was being blown by a tempest, before rising and crashing against Pikachu and Orchynx. The water then formed a spiraling column, dragging the unfortunate mouse and cat, while Gyarados rushed forward, swimming up the column, before finally smashing against its two opponents, sending them flying into the air while it returned to the ground.

"Pikaaaaaaa!"

"Chyyyyynx!"

"Pikachu! Orchynx!" Ash cried. However, Ash had no time to be concerned, as his mind worked on a way to get out of such a sticky situation. "Pikachu, Iron Tail on Orchynx! Launch her towards Gyarados!"

Pikachu and Orchynx righted themselves mid air as best as they could, before the former used his glowing tail to push the latter against Gyarados.

"Gyarados, burn them with Flamethrower!" Cali ordered.

"Orchynx, X-scissor!" Ash shouted.

Gyarados looked at the Pokemon falling towards it, fire building up in its mouth. However, thanks to Pikachu's thrust, Orchynx was able to reach the Mega Evolved Pokemon before it could fire its attack, and slashed an X across its face. Gyarados roared in pain, closing its eyes shut as the fire inside its mouth dispelled, while Orchynx landed on the ground.

"Gyarados!"

"And Pikachu, Electro Ball!" Ash ordered.

Pikachu spun while mid air, a sphere of yellow lightning forming on the tip of his tail, before launching the electric orb with a mighty

swing. The attack hit Gyarados, still reeling from Orchynx's sudden strike, resulting in a yellow flash with a small explosion.

"Now, Orchynx, Energy Ball, and Pikachu, Thunderbolt into it!" Ash ordered.

Orchynx fired yet another green glowing orb from her mouth, while Pikachu launched a yellow lightning bolt at it, the two attacks merging into a yellowish-green sphere of energy crackling with lightning.

"Gyarados, counter it with Flamethrower!" Cali ordered.

Having recovered from the previous two attacks, fire gathered on Gyarados' mouth, releasing it in the form of a cone of flames. The combination attack teared through the raging inferno, but it progressively lost power and momentum until it shrunk into nothingness, though thankfully the flames of Gyarados' attack dispelled into the air before they could push any further.

"Aqua Tail! Try to hit the two of them!" Cali ordered.

"Pikachu, dodge it with Quick Attack! Orchynx, jump over it!" Ash ordered.

Gyarados' tail was surrounded by swirling water and swung at the cat and mouse duo. Using Quick Attack, Pikachu blitzed past the water-covered limb and dashed towards Gyarados. Orchynx jumped as the tail came closer, but not high enough, taking the attack, which sent her flying backwards.

"Chyyynx!" Orchynx meowed in pain, before she landed on the water, making a large splash.

As much as Ash wanted to ask Orchynx if she was okay, he still had another Pokemon to direct.

"Pikachu, get as close to Gyarados as possible and use Thunderbolt!" Ash ordered.

Thanks to Quick Attack, Pikachu was able to get close enough to fire a Thunderbolt at point blank, something the yellow rodent did without hesitation. The entire place shone with a yellow light as electricity coursed through Gyarados, who let out a screech of pain. After the attack ended, Gyarados visibly slumped, wisps of smoke coming from multiple parts of his body, but the Mega Evolved Pokemon refused to give up.

"Come on Gyarados, I know you can do it! Waterfall again!" Cali ordered.

Gyarados roared, and once again the water around the islet began to rise and crash around Pikachu, hoisting the Electric-type into the air.

"Or!"

Turns out, the water Gyarados had called had dragged Orchynx back to the islet, but the Kitten Pokemon, angry and wet, was able to avoid the spiraling column that was forming.

This was a chance that Ash couldn't afford to waste. And waste it he did not.

"Orchynx, quickly! X-Scissor!"

Orchynx dashed towards Gyarados, busy preparing the Waterfall, her little paws splashing against the running water, before leaping at Gyarados and slashing a second X against its face. The Atrocious Pokemon flinched and roared in pain, losing its focus, causing the forming Waterfall to crumble, saving Pikachu from a devastating attack.

"Time to finish this! Pikachu, another Thunderbolt! Orchynx, Energy Ball!" Ash called.

"Gyarados-"

Mustering the last of their strength, Pikachu fired a yellow lightning bolt at Gyarados while Orchynx fired a green energy orb from her mouth. This time, both attacks collided with the Mega Evolved Pokemon, resulting in a large explosion of yellow sparks and green bits. The combined power of the super effective attack, plus all the damage Gyarados had taken before, proved to be too much, and the Water and Dark-type Pokemon collapsed against the sandy ground, as it regressed back to its normal form.

There was a moment of silence as everybody looked at the downed Gyarados, thin plumes of smoke still coming from its body. Then, the referee raised a flag in Ash's direction.

"Gyarados can't fight anymore! And since Cali has no more Pokemon while Ash has still two, Ash is the winner of the match!" he declared.

Everybody in the stands erupted into cheers and squeals of joy, as Pikachu and Orchynx collapsed on the spot, loudly letting out sighs of relief, as the effort they had made in taking down the powerful Atrocious Pokemon finally took a toll on their bodies.

A few moments later, after collecting his Pokemon, Ash, surrounded by his friends, was in front of Cali, who smiled proudly at him.

"To defeat my Mega Gyarados with a Pikachu and an Orchynx," Cali said, sounding amused as she shook her head. "Maria and Davern weren't exaggerating when they talked about you."

"Good to see I met your expectations," Ash said.

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu added.

"You did more than merely meet them," Cali said, as she extended her hand towards Ash. "It's both my pride and duty to hand you the Tide Badge. Congratulations for your well earned victory."

Ash took the badge, which was a stylized wave crashing over a pink surfboard. Grinning widely, the Pallet Town trainer couldn't help but raise his new badge above his head, before declaring, "I won the Tide Badge!"

"Pi-Pikachu!"

"Orchynx, or!"

"So, where do you plan to go now, Ash?" Cali asked. "I need to warn whoever is your next target that you're going after them," she said, chuckling.

"Well, so far, I'm not really sure," Ash replied. "I came here to accompany my friend Clemont, who got a job at the new power plant they're building."

"I see. If you accept my advice, with your level of skill, I'd either go to the gyms of Vinoville Town or Amatrie Town," Cali said. "That is, if you're looking for another challenge. Especially the latter, since Tiko, the Amatrie Gym Leader, is the strongest leader in all of West Tandor."

"Thanks for your suggestion, Cali," Ash said. "I'll keep them in mind when the time to choose our next destination arrives."

...

The group had returned to the Pokemon Center. Ash had left his Pokemon with Nurse Joy in order to get them back to full health, and was now sitting on a table at the lobby with the rest of the group and Lilia. Natalie and Vitor got fired up after seeing Ash's intense match against Cali, and were now in a sparring match of their own.

"How are your Pokemon, Ash?" Serena asked, just as Ash took his seat next to her.

"Nurse Joy says they're going to need to spend the whole night here, but nothing to worry about," Ash replied.

"That's hardly surprising, with how hard they fought," Lilia said, before turning to Clemont. "Are all of Ash's battles like that?"

Clemont couldn't help but smile. "Most of them. You should have seen it when he had to fight me for his fifth Kalos badge."

"It's an amazing spectacle, I'm not going to deny that," Lilia said. "I almost feel bad from keeping you from seeing the rest of his matches."

"While it's a bit sad that this is the last Gym Battle I'm going to see from Ash, it was one worth remembering," he then turned to the aforementioned, and added: "though, remember what I said. No matter what I have to do, I'll be there for both the League and the Grand Festival in order to see you two on your big moments."

"So..." Serena began, taking a deep breath before asking: "When are you leaving?"

"A ship will come to pick us up tomorrow at noon," it was Lilia who answered. "Though, have you guys decided where you are going to go next? If it has a port, I could have you ferried to your next destination."

"Not yet. Though, we aren't going to leave Bealbeach anytime soon, given that Serena's next contest will be here in two days," Ash replied.

"Hey, if you aren't in a hurry, why don't you come with us? Even if it's only for a day. That way, you guys could see the power plant and the kind of work Clemont will be doing," Lilia suggested.

"We can? That sounds great!" Bonnie said, speaking for the first time. She then turned towards Ash and Serena. "Please say yes!"

Ash, however, looked at Serena, leaving the decision to her.

"Sure. I think I already trained enough to take a day off," Serena agreed.

"Great! In that case, let's meet again tomorrow at noon at the port, okay?" Lilia said. "I can't wait for you guys to see the new power plant. We're going to be part of such a big event in Tandor's history!"

Lilia had no idea how right those words would prove to be.

Author's Note: And Ash gets another Gym Badge! Three down, five more to go!

After the Davern battle some of you had some concerns about how Ash always relied on Greninja to defeat the Gym Leader's Ace Pokemon. See? I told you that Ash wasn't going to use Greninja all the time, he simply had to rely on him until his other mons had time to catch up. And as you can see, that time is already here. Sure, he still used Pikachu, his most veteran mon, but so far Ash has never used Pikachu (in this story I mean) to beat a Gym's Ace, plus Pikachu can't Mega Evolve or anything similar (to show that Ash still can win without relying on extrenal power-ups even if his opponents do use them).

Cali in the game battles you in single format rather than doubles, but I decided to have her fight Ash in a double battle to shake things up a little bit. I hope the battle flowed well and wasn't too hard to follow, since writing them is trickier than one on ones.

On other news, not only we do see the Moki twins again (and Theo, briefly), but we finally see Lilia making her debut in person! Though, that means that Clemont will have to say goodbye, but don't worry, that doesn't mean he will completely disappear from this story. After all, there's a reason as for why I'm having him catch new Pokemon ;)

Thanks a lot to cricketlaxwolvesbandy, Sam, Fox McCloud, MegaSalamence64, hirowriter and Viroro-kun for reviewing last chapter, and special thanks to Viroro-kun for his work as beta reader, and all his edits and suggestions which made this story all that better.

Next time, we finally visit Nuclear Plant Epsilon. If you played the game, you know what it means. If you don't, well, I'm sure you can imagine it XD In the meantime, don't forget to leave a review with your thoughts on this chapter.

Nuclear Plant Epsilon, Part I

Chapter 24:

Nuclear Plant Epsilon, Part I

Bealbeach City

As the automatic doors opened with a swish, Serena stepped inside the large building and was immediately hit by a wave of cold air coming from the many air conditioners in place to keep the place cool and fresh. Quite the sharp contrast compared to the warm temperature -though not warm enough to be unbearable- outside the building.

Today was the day Clemont would finally leave the group for his job at the new power plant, so Serena wanted to give Clemont a small goodbye gift before he left. She remembered what Sycamore had said on Comet Port, about the jewelry shop that sold accessories for Keystones, and thought that it would be a gift both nice and practical. And, given that she was already here, she would also get some accessories for herself and Ash.

And maybe check other stores as well. It was only nine in the morning; she had more than two hours until she needed to be at the pier.

"Excuse me, miss!" the voice of a woman said, snapping Serena out of her thoughts. Given her clothes, it looked like that woman worked there. Maybe a salesperson? "You look like somebody who would enjoy a nice trip on a luxury cruise! Am I right?"

"I do," Serena agreed, before adding. "Though I don't think I look like somebody who can afford one."

"Oh, that's no problem! See, today two tickets for the Tandor Luxury Cruise are being raffled!" the saleswoman said, her excited tone

unwavering. "Only five pokedollars a ticket! Interested?"

The idea of going on a cruise with Ash was very appealing, to say the least. All the fun, and most importantly, romantic activities they could do together... and in fact, a cruise looked like the best place to finally confess her feelings to Ash. She had been preparing the ground for the inevitable moment, and she was hoping that Ash would be receptive to take their relationship beyond friendship.

The image of Bonnie derailed those thoughts. There were only two tickets, so she wouldn't be able to come with them. Either they'd have to buy another ticket for her - and she wasn't sure if their modest budget would allow such expenditure - or leave her somewhere else while the cruise lasted.

Clemont couldn't have chosen a worse time to leave the group. And as much as Serena wanted to go on that cruise, she wouldn't get on that ship without knowing first that Bonnie was well taken care of in their absence.

"Young miss?"

"I'm here, I'm here!" The saleswoman once again snapped Serena out of her thoughts, the girl feeling a little embarrassed over zoning out like that while she fantasized about Ash.

"Also, if you're a fan of contests, the Luxury Cruise has its own Contest Hall, where a contest will take place a day after it sails!" the woman continued with her sales pitch. That last piece of data really got Serena's attention. "And the contest will have a special judge! A Top Coordinator from another region!"

"Really? I mean, I'm a coordinator myself!" Serena exclaimed.

"Then the more reason to buy a ticket!" the saleswoman added.

"Sure, give me a ticket, please."

The woman smiled, and handed a ticket to Serena. Upon looking it, she saw the number: 2425

"Thanks for your purchase! The raffle will be in three days at twelve o'clock sharp, so please come back by then!" the woman said in a chipper tone. "Best of luuuuuck!"

Nodding, Serena put the ticket in her skirt's pocket, which was also holding the group's three Keystones, and after checking a map, the Kalosian girl headed directly for the jewelry shop.

The place not only had a lot of accessories with slots that could carry a Keystone, but there were many Mega Stone holders for Pokemon as well. Though, for the time being, Serena decided to focus on the Keystone carriers instead. A golden ring quickly caught her eye, which would also make a good complement for her contests. For Clemont, she chose a cufflink shaped like a lightning bolt that he could wear on the sleeve of his jumpsuit.

Though, no matter how many accessories she looked for, she couldn't find any that would suit Ash. There were many bracelets, similar to what Alain wore, but she wanted to buy Ash something more original. Another ring to match hers? No, she wanted Ash to have something more unique. A necklace? Perhaps, but the designs she had seen didn't convince her.

That's it, until she saw it. The kind of Keystone holder that would be perfect for Ash.

...

After buying the Keystone holders, Serena spent another hour in the department store. Apart from buying the usual supplies for Pokemon trainers such as medicine and pokeballs -Because you never knew how long it would be until you found a Pokemon Center-, Serena also indulged in getting a couple new pieces of cloth for herself. Her buying impetus sated for the time being, the honey blonde returned to the Pokemon Center.

She didn't find either of her friends in the lobby, but on the battleground next to it. Ash was sparring against Clemont, the Kantonian using Dunsparce against the lemon blond's Bunnelby, while Bonnie watched and cheered on her brother.

"Hey guys, I'm back!" Serena said, waving at them. "Can you guys pause the battle for a moment and come over here? I have something to give you."

"Sure!" Ash said, motioning for Dunsparce to take a rest, while he and Clemont walked towards the other teen.

"I think it was about time we stopped having our Keystones always inside that case, so I went and bought some Keystone holders. Ta-da! This is mine!" Serena said, showing her friends the golden ring with the Keystone attached to it as if it were a gemstone.

"Whoa! So cool!" Ash gushed.

"It looks really good on you, Serena!" Bonnie agreed.

"Thanks!" Serena beamed at the praise, before she started rummaging in her skirt's pocket. "Though, of course, I didn't buy them just for me. Clemont this is for you. Consider it my goodbye gift."

Serena then handed Clemont the lightning bolt-shaped cufflink with another Keystone on it.

"Thanks a lot, Serena!" Clemont said, as he attached the cufflink to the sleeve of his jumpsuit. "I couldn't have asked for a better gift."

"And this is for you, Ash," Serena said, her cheeks developing a pink hue. "I hope you like it."

Serena then handed Ash a golden pendant shaped like a curved shuriken, with the Keystone embedded in the middle.

"Whoa, it looks so cool!" Ash said, taking the pendant from Serena's hand and quickly putting it around his neck. He held the shuriken in his hand, looking at it with gleeful eyes. Then, he looked at Serena. "Thanks a lot. I love it!"

Serena's pink cheeks began to turn red, as she inwardly cheered.

...

Noon finally arrived, and everybody was on the pier, waiting for Lilia's boat to arrive. As they did, Serena began to look at the many ships docked at the port, with one of them vastly overshadowing the others with its massive size: the Tandor Luxury Cruise. Serena's hands instinctively went to her skirt's pocket, where the number for the raffle was. In two days, she'd know if those two tickets would be hers or not.

"Well, our ride is here," Lilia cheerfully said, snapping Serena out of her fantasies before they could even form.

Serena saw a moderately large yacht with the Orangics logo on the otherwise white hull approaching the port.

"Whoa! Is that ship yours?" Ash asked, amazed.

"My dad's. Just one of many. Everybody on board!" Lilia said as the yacht docked on the pier and a gangway was extended so they could board it.

"Heeeeeeeey!" a distant voice called.

Everybody turned around to the direction of the call, and much to their surprise, they saw Natalie and Vitor running towards them.

"It's Natalie and Vitor," Ash pointed out.

"Wonder what they want?" Clemont asked.

"They look like they're in a hurry," Serena added.

Eventually the two young teens arrived at the boat, not before stopping and taking deep breaths, hinting that they might have covered the distance between the Pokemon Center to the port running.

"Heh, they remind me of you, brother," Bonnie snickered.

"You okay?" Ash asked, as she patted Vitor on the back in an attempt to help him.

"Y-Yeah," Vitor replied.

"Say... you guys were going to the new power plant, right?" Natalie asked. "It's okay if you give us a lift?"

"You want to come to the plant? Why?" Lilia asked. "Not that I mind taking you there, the ship's big enough for two more people, but you never mentioned anything about wanting to go there yesterday."

"We didn't plan to. It was a last minute thing, really," Vitor said, his breath becoming a little more stable. "But dad said there was something on the island he wanted us to see."

"Did he tell you what?" Lilia asked.

"He told us we'd know once we got there," Natalie said, before adding: "I know, it sounds cryptic as hell, but he made it sound like it was important."

Lilia crossed her arms, and looked at the twins, as if debating if she should allow them to come on such short notice and such a vague excuse. "As odd as this feels to me, your father is the Head Ranger of Tandor, so I imagine he'd have his reasons to send you there. Alright, you can come."

The twins smiled, and boarded the yacht, which quickly headed towards the power plant.

...

The captain said that it would take the ship no more than twenty minutes to arrive at the island the power plant was located at. It turned out, though, a lot of things can change in twenty minutes, one of them being the weather going from warm and sunny to still warm but raining as a storm began to form above them.

After putting their raincoats on, they descended from the ship onto the island's small port, which was buzzing with activity, filled to the brim with all sorts of construction materials, vehicles and equipment that was being hauled away, more than likely to the power plant. There were also many barracks, where the workers presumably slept, as well as a functional Pokemon Center next to a small clinic.

There was a middle aged man with red hair and a yellow stripe crossing it directing all the work on the port. He reminded Serena of an adult version of Theo. His father, perhaps? Upon noticing the new arrival, the man dropped what he was doing and went to greet the group.

"Welcome back, Lilia!" the man told the bespectacled girl. Then, he took a glance at the group, and let out a whistle. "I thought you were going to bring a new guy, but you took quite the entourage and... are those Kellyn's kids?"

"Hey there Cameron!" Natalie said, waving at him.

"Nice to see you!" Vitor added.

"Looking good, kids! Fancy seeing you here!" the man, Cameron, said, crossing his arms and raising an eyebrow at them. "So, how's my boy doing? I know you ran into him a few times."

"He just beat Cali and got his third badge," Natalie began. "Then he left."

"He seems to be doing okay," Vitor added.

"I was a little afraid that Theo might not have been ready for a Pokemon journey, but I'm glad that's not the case," the man said, relieved. "So, who are the rest?"

"This is Clemont, our new hire," Lilia proudly said, placing both hands on Clemont's shoulder. "He'll help make the plant both safer and more efficient."

"So, this is the prodigy you've been talking about, huh? Looks a bit on the younger side, but I know better than judging a book by its cover," Cameron replied. "We haven't had a prodigy since... eh, nevermind. And the other kids?"

"These are Ash and Serena, Clemont's friends, and Bonnie, his little sister. I thought they could come here so they can see the place Clemont will be working at, before they bid each other goodbye," Lilia explained.

"Ah, I see. I don't think you'd find that much excitement in a power plant still under construction, but they're free to come and see," Cameron said. "Come on, I'll show you the way to the plant."

The group began to follow Cameron towards the eastern part of the island. In the distance, about a kilometer away or so, they could see part of the power plant under construction. One of the exhaust towers was already complete, and two others still under construction.

"The main building is almost complete, and so is the reactor and the radioactive fuel storage," Cameron began to explain. "We still need to work on the turbines, generator and a few other security measures. But that's what our little genius is for."

"I'll try my best, sir," Clemont humbly said.

"If half of what Lilia has said about you is true, you won't have to worry about disappointing anybody," Cameron assured. "We need all the best minds on this project to ensure that another tragedy like the one that happened ten years ago can never happen again and..."

hey, wait a minute, I know why-" he began as he turned around, his eyes focused on the Moki twins.

Cameron was interrupted by Ash's Pokegear ringing. Checking the screen, he frowned upon seeing that the caller was an unknown number. Still, he decided to answer the call, just to be polite. Upon accepting it, a brown haired man in his forties with an eyepiece similar to those used by Team Omega grunts appeared on the screen.

"Um, hello?" Ash asked, unsure.

"Hello, young man. Are you Ash Ketchum?" the man asked. Ash nodded. "My name is Kellyn Raine, Head Ranger of Tandor."

"Dad?" both twins said at once, quickly flanking Ash in order to see their father on his pokegear.

"How did you get this number?" Ash asked.

"You gave it to us the first time you contacted the Rangers for that incident with the Feliger. Don't you remember? Oh, I see that my kids are already there. Are you on-"

"I knew it! I knew you were behind this, Kellyn!" Cameron angrily said, forcing his way into Ash, and lifting the pokegear to his eye level.

"Oh, hello there, Cameron," Kellyn flatly said. "I'm glad to see you too."

"Listen Kellyn, I'm going to put your kids on a boat back to the continent, you hear me? This isn't a place for them!" Cameron yelled.

"That's not a decision for you to make," the Head Ranger fired back. "I sent them there for a reason."

"It is, since for the time being, I'm the one in charge of this place!" Cameron replied, just as angrily. While Cameron was a friendly and composed man at first, now everybody could see where Theo got his temper from. "A destroyed power plant is a dangerous place for a grown adult, and even more for children! Didn't you hear what I say about the Pokemon roaming the area? The flora might have recovered, but the fauna definitely did not."

"Destroyed power plant?" Ash asked, as he awkwardly tried to free his arm from Cameron's grasp.

"There used to be another power plant on this island," Clemont began to explain. "But ten years ago, there was a meltdown, and the plant was destroyed."

"Thankfully, almost everybody was evacuated in time, and there was only one casualty," Lilia continued.

"Yes, and that casualty was Doctor Lucille Raine, the most brilliant nuclear physicist this world has ever seen," Cameron finished. "His wife, and their mother."

Ash, Serena, Clemont and Bonnie looked at the twins with a mixture of pity and surprise. The twins, for their part, averted their gazes, fidgeting uncomfortably in their spots.

"I know it's dangerous. That's why I was planning to ask Ash for help," Kellyn replied. "Ash Ketchum might be young, but he's a very strong trainer, if what my Rangers have told me of him is any indication."

"I can help? How?" Ash asked, finally freeing his arm from Cameron's grip.

"Listen Ash, I want you to escort my kids to the destroyed power plant. You don't need to enter, just see it up close," Kellyn began to explain. His voice quivered a little. "Since Lucille... left us, things have never been the same. Her absence left a wound in our family

that never healed. And I think that... that if the kids can see the place their mother was last seen alive... well, maybe it can help us heal a little."

"Dad..." Natalie said, almost in a whisper.

"You're never going to let this go, aren't you?" Cameron asked, exasperated, but sounding like conceding defeat. "Fine, if this Ash kid is as strong as you claim, then I guess I can allow this little detour."

"Thank you Cameron. This means a lot for both me and my family as a whole. Ash, I leave my kids in your care," Kellyn said, before the call ended, and the screen returned to the Pokegear's main menu.

Cameron let out a tired sigh, as he turned towards Ash. "Alright, listen up kids, because this is important: south of here is the old power plant. It's a little on the far end, but it couldn't take you more than half an hour to reach. Go there and see it from the outside, but don't even *think* of going inside, you hear me? After all these years, not even the Twin Gods know what's inside, and I'm not taking any risks. Especially not with this weather."

"Don't worry Cameron, we will be careful," Vitor assured him.

"Now, I wouldn't be so worried about letting you go there if it wasn't for the Pokemon living in the area," Cameron said, as he scratched the back of his neck. "The radiation... it changed them. For the worse. They're beyond aggressive and territorial. If they see you, they will attack you, and will do so without mercy. Once again, if you only find a few and you can deal with them, fine, but if they come in greater numbers, come back *immediately* .

"I was the one who had to tell Kellyn about Lucille, and I won't tell him how he also lost his children to that accursed place," Cameron insisted.

"In that case, I better go with Ash too. I might not be as strong as him, but my Pokemon can still be of help," Serena offered, as she stood next to Ash, who nodded.

"I'll be coming too!" Bonnie added, as she went to join Ash and Serena.

"No, you won't!" Clemont said, pulling Bonnie back with his backpack's Aipom Arm. "Didn't you hear Cameron? That place can be dangerous even for Ash, there's no way I'm letting you go."

"I'm not helpless, I have Dedenne!" Bonnie protested.

"Come on Bonnie, be reasonable," Lilia gently pleaded. "Besides, I assure you that there's nothing on that derelict building that can catch your interest."

Bonnie didn't say anything, she just crossed her arms and pouted angrily. Dedenne mimicked her.

"Don't worry Bonnie, we'll be back in no time. Come on guys, let's go!" Ash said, as he, Serena and the twins headed south, towards the old plant. After releasing his sister, Clemont, Bonnie, Lilia and Cameron continued towards the power plant.

"So... Lilia, how did you and Clemont meet?" Cameron asked. "Since I don't remember you mentioning how you know him, other than being the Gym Leader of Lumiose City."

"Truth be told, by coincidence," Lilia said.

"Yeah. We just ran into Lilia while we were heading towards Snowbelle City so Ash could get his last Kalos badge, and well..." Clemont continued.

For the new few minutes, Cameron listened how Clemont and Lilia met and bonded thanks to Bonnie's habit of asking any girl they crossed paths with to marry Clemont, how impressed Lilia was with

Clemont's inventions, their run in with the Team Rocket Trio -which required some context for Cameron to understand it- and lastly Lilia parting ways with the group when she decided she wasn't ready for a serious relationship that moment.

By the time they finished their tale, they had reached the power plant. Aside from the two exhaust towers, they could see many other parts still under construction, surrounded by cranes, excavators and trucks, as well as crates full of construction materials.

"Well, here we are. What do you think?" Cameron asked Clemont.

"Really impressive, sir. It's even bigger than the Kalos Power Plant," Clemont said, taking a look at the building. "Don't you think it's great, Bonnie?"

But Clemont got no answer.

"Bonnie?"

Now that he thought about it, Bonnie had been quite silent while he and Lilia told the redheaded man the story of how they met. And given the young girl's animosity towards the brown haired girl...

"Bonnie!?" Clemont asked, as he turned around, only to find Bonnie nowhere near in sight.

"Where... where did she go?" Lilia asked, looking around as well. "She was here a few moments ago!"

"Oh damn... this island is no place for a little girl to wander around on her own, especially in this weather..." Cameron said, mildly panicked.

"Knowing her, she probably went after Ash and Serena," Clemont deduced, which brought him little relief. He then opened his pokegear. "I better give them a call, to check if she's with them..."

Unfortunately, his call went unanswered.

...

As Clemont, Lilia and Cameron went to the power plant under construction. Ash, Serena and the twins continued south towards the destroyed old plant. They didn't talk, the sound of the constant rain and the wind rustling the nearby trees being the only thing that broke what would be an otherwise eerie silence. That's it, until Serena decided to strike up a conversation.

"Say, may I ask you something? It's a little personal," Serena asked the twins.

"It can't be more personal than what we're going to do now, so sure, go ahead," Natalie said.

"You two live in Moki Town, but your father works and lives in Bealbeach City," Serena began. "How is that? I mean... after your mother's death, I thought he'd like to keep his remaining family close."

"That's because dad never really moved from mom's death," Vitor replied. "It's not that bad for us, since we were very little when the accident happened and hardly remember her."

"But dad... she was unable to cope with her not being with us anymore. As if he refuses to believe that she's dead," Natalie continued.

"That's because he does," Vitor punctualized. "Sometimes, whenever he comes to Moki Town to visit, he and Cameron have some heated arguments over her. Dad seems to think that mom is still alive somewhere, since no one found her corpse."

"But, wasn't she like, in the middle of a nuclear explosion?" Ash asked, scratching his head. "Not to sound insensitive, but I don't think anyone could survive that..."

"Pika..."

"Tell that to our father," Natalie said, before sighing in defeat. "So yeah, dad threw himself into his job and shipped the three of us to Moki Town with his aunt. She was the one who raised us after the incident."

"Man, that sucks. Thank goodness our dad would never do that to either Clemont or me," Bonnie said, shaking her head.

Wait a minute, Bonnie?

"Bonnie?" Serena asked, as she turned towards the newcomer.

"Bonnie, what are you doing here? You were supposed to stay with Clemont!"

Bonnie huffed, crossing her arms and rolling her eyes in annoyance.

"Yeah, like I'm going to be near Clemont and his girlfriend being all lovey-dovey. Nah, I prefer to be with you guys. Wherever you go, something exciting and awesome follows!"

"Did you just snuck away to come here?" Serena asked in shock.

"Clemont must be worried sick about you! I better call him to tell him that you're with us..." Serena said, as she opened up her pokegear and selected Clemont's number, but the call didn't go through. "No signal?"

Ash, Vitor and Natalie checked their pokegears as well. The result was the same.

"Guess we're too far away from both the port and the power plant," Vitor deduced.

"In that case, we better-" Ash began.

"Pikapi!" Pikachu cried in warning, interrupting his trainer.

"Pikachu? Did you hear something?" Ash asked.

Then, the humans also heard something: the sound of several bushes being rustled, as well as hissing and growling noises. After a

few seconds of dread, several Pokemon emerged from the nearby bushes, stalking towards the newcomers.

There were a bunch of Chyinmunk, Kinetmunk, Tancoon and Costraw. However, rather than sporting their usual colors, their skin or fur was deep dark blue and bright green. Their glowing white eyes lacked irises and pupils, giving them a very eerie appearance. Their bodies glowed with a faint green aura. They continued hissing and growling towards the humans.

"CHYN!"

"TAN!"

"TRAW!"

Quickly taken over by fear and unease, everybody huddled around Ash. Meanwhile, Pikachu jumped from Ash's shoulder, standing protectively in front of his trainer.

"Pikaaaaa!" he growled, releasing a few sparks from his cheeks as a warning, not that it did much to deter the coming Pokemon.

"What... what kind of Pokemon are those?" Natalie asked, as she latched to one of Ash's arms.

"Guess this is what Cameron warned us about... the Pokemon changed by the radiation..." Vitor said.

"It seems they don't want us in their turf..." Bonnie whimpered, latching to Ash's other arm.

"CHYN! CHYIMUNK!" one of the Chyinmunks loudly chirped, its voice sounding distorted and unnatural.

"Ash, take out the PST. It seems they're trying to tell us something," Serena suggested.

Ash nodded, as he slowly unslung his backpack, opened it, and after a bit of rummaging, took out the gadget Professor Cypress awarded them with for helping with Garlikid. Switching it on, he aimed the microphone at the group of Nuclear Pokemon, hoping it would also work on them.

[KILL THE INTRUDERS! KILL THE INTRUDERS! KILL THE INTRUDERS!]

Everybody winced upon hearing that, and Ash now wished it didn't work. However, he pushed those feelings aside, and pulled out a pokeball.. "I don't think they're going to let us leave without a battle. Aveden, I choose you!"

The other three trainers nodded, grabbing a pokeball of their own as well.

"Minicorn, go!"

"Eletux, come out and play!"

"Sableau, time to kick ass!"

Shortly after Ash's Aveden materialized, flapping his wings and floating above Pikachu, he was soon joined by Serena's Minicorn, Vitor's starter, and a Pokemon that Ash had never seen before, one that looked like a Cassnail, only much bigger body with a white underbelly, a brown skin hood around its neck, and a shell shaped like a tower.

He'd scan it with the Pokedex later. Now there was a battle they needed to win.

The nuclear horde charged forward, hollering and hissing, and a pseudo-battle royale broke out. Ash ordered Aveden to spread the Nuclear Pokemon with Gust, something Serena followed on by ordering Minicorn to use Fairy Wind. In response, several Chyinemunk and Kinetmunk fired Thudershock at them. Some of

them hit, but others were blocked by Natalie's Sableau, who was completely unaffected.

Empowered by the falling rain, Sableau and Eletux fired water attacks at the Nuclear Pokemon, who cried in pain as they were blasted away by the water. Meanwhile, Pikachu moved from one flank to another with Quick Attack and kept the Nuclear Pokemon at bay with Thunderbolts and Iron Tails.

"It seems that the radiation made these Pokemon weaker. Look how fast they're going down!" Vitor said, as hope reinvigorated him.

That moment, a Tancoon and a Costraw fired green energy beams towards his Eletux, the attack connecting with an explosion of the same color, blasting the hippocampus Pokemon back.

"Eletux!" Thankfully, Vitor's starter Pokemon was still able to fight. "What kind of attack was that?"

Ash knew, since he had seen that attack used by Alain's Xenomite. "That's Gamma Ray, a Nuclear-type attack! Guys, I think these Pokemon have been turned into Nuclear-types by the radiation!"

"That would explain why they're going down so easily. Nuclear Pokemon are weak to pretty much everything but themselves," Serena reasoned.

"Really? Great! Sabelau, use Bubble-" Natalie was interrupted by a cry of pain from Sableau, also hit by a couple of Gamma Rays. "Recover! Use Recover!" she amended, before turning at Serena and asking. "That's fine and good, but what types do resist Nuclear moves?"

"I think none! Every Pokemon is weak to Nuclear-type moves, so try not to get hit!" Serena warned.

"Wait, that's not true! I remember that there was one type who resisted Nuclear-type attacks! Steel!" Ash said.

"Great! Do you guys have any Steel-type Pokemon?" Vitor asked.

"I do! Dearewl, time to kick ass!" Natalie said, sending the very first Pokemon she ever caught, now in its second stage.

"Orchynx, I choose you!" Ash said, releasing his Grass and Steel-type Tandorian starter. "Alright, let's have Orchynx and Dearewl take the brunt of the battle! Everybody else, support them from behind!"

"HELP!" Bonnie screamed.

Much to their horror, they saw that Bonnie was being harassed by a flock of Nuclear Owten. Dedenne was trying to drive them away with weak Thundershocks, but the angry fliers weren't deterred by the tiny Electric and Fairy-type.

"Braixen, go!" Serena said, tossing her starter's pokeball in Bonnie's direction. "Protect Bonnie with Psybeam!"

"Brai, brai!" Braixen cried. She glared at the offending Owten, her eyes glowing with a swirly rainbow of colors, before they fired a beam of the same color at them. Some of them flew out of the way, others were hit, instantly knocked out by the potency of the attack.

"Thank you, Braixen!" Bonnie shouted.

"Thank her later! Now go and find a place to hide while we deal with these Pokemon!" Serena told Bonnie.

Ash's strategy was paying off. Aside from Nuclear attacks, Steel-types were known for their vast defensive capabilities, so Orchynx and Dearewl could also resist most of the attacks the Nuclear Pokemon launched at them -and completely ignore the Poison-type moves used by the Costraw- while countering with Energy Balls and Rock Tombs.

Behind the two Steel-types, Natalie's Sableau dealt with a couple of Chyinmunk and a Tancoon, all four of them blasted by an

indiscriminate Thunderbolt by Pikachu, who didn't have to worry about harming the girl's Pokemon. Meanwhile, Eletux protected Minicorn from a barrage of Sludge and Acid launched by several Costraw, while Minicorn herself countered with Charge Beam.

A thought then crossed Serena's mind.

"So, these Pokemon were turned into Nuclear-types, but some of them originally have two types, and as far as I know, there are no Pokemon with more than two types," Serena began. "What type did they lose for Nuclear?"

"I don't know, but I think I have a way to find out. Costraw, come out and play!" Vitor said, releasing his Sucker Pokemon. "Costraw, confusion on those Nuclear Costraw!"

Vitor's Costraw's eyes glowed with a pink light, as did the eye symbol on its body. The Nuclear Costraw were surrounded by an outline of the same color, before they were easily lifted into the air and launched backwards with such force, it was almost as if they didn't weigh anything.

"Costraw is part Psychic type, meaning that Psychic moves shouldn't affect them that much," Vitor began. "But those Costraw..."

"They were very vulnerable to psychic moves. That means it's the secondary type that gets replaced by Nuclear," Serena finished.

"Good to know that! Now let's keep fighting!" Natalie shouted.

And fight they did. Dearewl summoned a rain of boulders over another flock of Owten, while Orchynx slammed a Tancoon against a nearby tree with a powerful Iron Tail. Vitor's Eletux was knocked out by a combination of a Mega Drain from a Costraw and a Gamma Ray from a Kinetmunk. Cursing under his breath, Vitor returned his downed starter, and sent Leafeon to replace it.

Aveden knocked an Eshouten with a powerful Air Cutter, before lifting a Kinetmunk into the air with a Gust, the lack of resistance to the move hinting no longer being part Electric-type. Braixen fired Psybeams and Flamethrowers left and right in wide arcs, hitting multiple Pokemon, the rain dampened the latter attack's power a little, but not enough to make a difference for the Nuclear Pokemon taking the attack.

After a tough battle that threatened to have no end, the Nuclear Pokemon, realizing that the intruders weren't budging, displayed some degree of survival instinct, and decided to leave, running away in every direction before disappearing behind the shrubbery.

There was a moment of silence broken only by the rain and the wind. Once the fact that the battle was over sunk in, the trainers finally allowed themselves to relax, and sighed in relief.

"Thank goodness. I thought this was never going to end," Serena moaned, as she returned her Pokemon.

"I've seen my fair share of aggressive and territorial Pokemon, but these were something else," Ash replied, returning his Pokemon as well. "They weren't just angry Pokemon, they were... rabid, mindless beasts. Anyway, good battle, you two. You've trained your Pokemon well," Ash told the siblings.

Now that the battle was finally over, Ash pulled his Pokedex out in order to scan Sableau, before Natalie returned it to its pokeball.

" Sableau, the Tower Pokemon, and Cassnail's evolution. Water/Ground. The colorful patterns on its shell makes them desirable to collectors. Their cast-off shells are often used in jewelry," the Pokedex explained.

"Ash, I think we should return. We may run into more of those Pokemon as we get close to the old power plant," Serena suggested. "In fact, that power plant might be their lair."

"Agreed," Ash said, looking at the twins as if expecting them to protest, but the two of them merely nodded. "Especially since Bonnie is with us."

"Hey... where is Bonnie?" Natalie said, looking around,

"She was... here?" Ash asked, looking around as well, noticing that there was no sign of the lemon blonde.

"What? But... she was here a second ago!" Serena shouted, taking her hands to her head in concern. "Bonnie!? Bonnie!?"

...

"Dedenne! Dedenne!" Bonnie called, as she frantically looked from one side to another. She looked behind rocks and inside hollow trunks, any place small enough for Dedenne to fit, which given the Antenna's Pokemon size were quite many. Bonnie was starting to get both frustrated and worried. "Come on Dedenne, where are you!?"

Bonnie had found a good place to hide as she was told, behind a bunch of bushes. Unfortunately, said place to hide wasn't as good as she believed, given that she was found out by a Nuclear Tancoon. Before the tainted Raccoon Dog Pokemon could attack her, Dedenne jumped out of her bag and tried to hit it with Nuzzle, but the Nuclear Pokemon was both faster and stronger, and swiped the tiny Pokemon with an Iron Tail.

Either because it took Dedenne's attack as a personal offense or because it was hungry and Dedenne looked yummy, the Nuclear Tancoon ignored Bonnie and chased after the terrified Electric and Fairy-type, who ran away into the thicket. And Bonnie, naturally, rushed after the two of them. Given how busy her friends were with the nuclear horde, they probably didn't even notice she had left.

Unfortunately for Bonnie, she lost sight of both her Pokemon and his chaser, so now she was doing the only thing she could: call for

Dedenne and hope for the best.

"Nene?"

Her hopes were validated as she saw Dedenne's head popping up from behind a rock.

"Dedenne! There you are!"

"Nenenene!"

Dedenne happily cried as he rushed towards Bonnie, the girl scooping it on her hands.

"I was so worried, Dedenne! Thank goodness that ugly Nuclear Pokemon didn't get you!" Bonnie said, rubbing the Antenna Pokemon against her cheek, before placing it on her yellow bag. "Alright, time to return with the others, uh..."

Bonnie began to look around, and realized, much to her horror, that she had no idea of where she was.

"Okay, this *miiiiight* be a problem..." Bonnie began, looking around in a vain attempt to orient herself. She began to grow more and more uneasy when she was unable to find her way back. She couldn't tell which way did she come from, and there was nothing that could tell her where Ash and the others were.

Then, the solution presented itself. Or better said, Bonnie realized she had it all along.

"Hey, wait a minute, I have my Pokegear!" Bonnie said, raising her left hand, where the yellow colored device was attached to. "And it has a GPS function! Which I can use to find the others!"

However, before Bonnie could do so, she was startled by the sound of bushes rustling behind her. Could it be another Nuclear Pokemon? Clutching Dedenne tight, she turned around, and shouted: "Who's there!?"

There was something hidden behind the bushes, covered by the shadows they were casting. Something big enough to tower over the young Kalosian girl. Two green glowing eyes pierced her very soul.

" Rrrrrrrroaaaaach..."

...

Back with Ash's group, they were discussing what to do to find Bonnie. Thankfully, the idea of using the Pokegear's GPS function to track her down came up pretty fast.

"Alright, let's see..." Ash said, as he began fiddling with his own blue colored Pokegear. "Yes! Here she is! I believe this is her."

"Great! Where?" Natalie asked, impatient.

"She seems to be around six hundred meters to the southeast. Huh, she's pretty close to the old power plant." Ash said, before closing the pokegear.

"Great. Let's pick her up and leave this place as fast as possible," Serena urged.

"Yeah. Bonnie isn't far away, but we should better-"

Ash was interrupted by Bonnie's high pitched scream coming from afar.

Author's Note: Welp, Bonnie's dead. I know some of you hoped that Bonnie would leave as well so Ash and Serena could be alone with each other, so I listened to your pleas and got it out of the way. RIP Bonnie, she will be missed :D

So, before our heroes went to the Power Plant, I decided it was about time for them to get their Keystone Holders. I hope my choices fit them. Though, if you have seen the official art of Ash

and co's new look in the Ao3 version, you should know already know how they'd look. Also, Serena entered a raffle for a pair of tickets for the Tandor Luxury Cruise! Will she win? Who knows! :D

So yeah, the Moki Twins join the group for the time being. Given the plot, they HAD to be in this chapter, since Nuclear Plant Epsilon was a place of significance for their family.

After the preview of Alain's Xenomite, our heroes finally get to see Nuclear-type Pokemon in the wild! Though, unlike Alain's Xenomite, these Pokemon weren't born like this, but transformed by the radiation, a process that twisted their minds beyond recognition, leaving nothing but feral, hyper-aggressive beasts in their place. And as much as they wish it was otherwise, this will be the first of many, many times Ash and friends will have to fight an horde of Nuclear Pokemon.

Thanks a lot to Ricardo Valencia, Fox McCloude, MegaSalamence64, Timmy, cricketlaxwolvesbandy, hirowriter and Viroro-kun for reviewing last chapter, and special thanks for Viroro-kun, for his work as a betareader, and all his edits and suggestions which made this story all the better.

Part II coming soon(ish). In the meantime, don't forget to leave a review!

Nuclear Plant Epsilon, Part II

Chapter 25:

Nuclear Plant Epsilon, Part II

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!" Bonnie's scream echoed across the trees, drowning the constant rain and wind, before it was suddenly silenced.

"BONNIE!" Serena screamed, as she, Ash and the twins quickly ran towards the direction the scream came from, the same direction her GPS signal came from.

They ran as fast as they could, Ash quickly outpacing the other three. As they ran, the ruined exhaust towers of the old power plant became visible, getting bigger and bigger as they came closer. Ash was thankful that no Nuclear Pokemon had jumped out of the bushes to attack them.

"Roach!"

Spoke too soon.

Everybody stopped suddenly as a Pokemon they had never seen appeared before them. A large insect with a green and black carapace, four brown upper arms, large green glowing eyes, which stood on his black hind legs with a hunched posture. Clearly a Nuclear Pokemon.

"Pikaaaa!" Pikachu reacted instantly, jumping in front of Ash and landing on all fours, sparks jumping out of his cheeks, ready to attack.

"We don't have time for this! Pikachu, use Thunderbolt!" Ash hotly ordered.

"R-roach!"

Then, much to their surprise, the Nuclear Pokemon did something none of them expected: he took a step back and held his arms protectively.

"Ro, roach! Geig!" the Nuclear Pokemon cried, his voice sounding like a clickety-clack.

Pikachu didn't attack, and looked at Ash, a bit confused. The four teens were also looking at each other, as if anybody knew why this clearly Nuclear Pokemon was behaving in such a different way from the ones they had seen before.

"It doesn't want to attack us...?" Vitor asked, his eyes fixed on the large insect.

Wordlessly, Natalie pulled out her Pokedex and scanned the creature in front of her.

" Geigeroach, the Radroach Pokemon. Bug/Nuclear. Its simple body structure allows it to survive intense levels of radiation. They multiply rapidly and will eat anything in sight," the Pokedex droned.

"Wait, his natural type is Nuclear?" Natalie asked. "I thought that all Nuclear Pokemon were tainted by radiation!"

"Geuge, ge, roach!" the Pokemon, Geigeroach, continued, sounding a bit desperate.

"Not all of them. In fact, we already saw one such Pokemon before," Serena said, recalling Alain's Xenomite. Like this Geigeroach, that Xenomite behaved like a normal Pokemon, even obeyed a trainer, unlike the mindless beasts they had fought before. "Ash, I have an idea. Let's give the PST another try."

Ash nodded, and after getting the translating gadget out of his backpack, he aimed the microphone at Geigeroach.

[Please do not hurt me. I mean you no harm.]

After what they heard the previous time they had used the PST on a Nuclear Pokemon, hearing those words had a calming effect on the four teens.

"We won't harm you, Geigeroach, but we're in a hurry right now. We're looking for a little girl," Ash said.

"Blonde hair, blue eyes, carrying a Dedenne?" Serena asked, in hopes that the Geigeroach had seen her.

[All humans look the same to me. Especially now, with so many humans on the island. And I don't know what a "Dedenne" is. Is this human a member of your swarm?] Geigeroach asked.

"Yeah, she's part of our... swarm," Serena said.

"She was the one who screamed. If you're here, you must have heard her," Vitor pointed out.

Geigeroach perked up. [Oh. In that case, yes, I saw this human].

"Where is she!?" Ash practically yelled in Geigeroach's face.

Geigeroach turned around, and pointed one of his arms towards the old power plant. [Another pair of humans took her away inside the ruined building. I tried to help her, but in my current state, I was no match for the Pokemon they commanded.]

"You tried to help Bonnie?" Natalie asked, surprised.

[I haven't eaten anything in two days. This human realized my condition, and gave me food. It was the most delicious food my jaws had the pleasure to taste], Geigeroach recounted. [Normally there's no shortage of food here. But since those humans evicted the Pokemon out of their lair, they've been invading my territory and eating its food].

"Are there people in the old power plant? But... why? It makes no sense," Natalie began. "I thought everybody was working on the new plant."

"And why would they kidnap Bonnie?" Vitor asked.

"We can worry about that once Bonnie is safe and sound. It seems that we're going into the plant after all," Ash declared.

Serena then rummaged through her bag, and pulled out a bunch of pokepuffs which she handed to Geigeroach. "Here. It's not much, but it should keep you going for a while."

The Radroach Pokemon smelled them, before quickly grabbing them and wolfing them down.

[Thank you, humans. Your kind's kindness knows no limits,]
Geigeroach said through the PST. [If you plan to go into the ruined building, allow me to accompany you. I do wish to see that no harm befalls to the human that fed me first.]

Ash nodded, and the group continued their trek towards the old power plant, this time with no Nuclear Pokemon getting in the way. After five minutes of quick pace, they reached their destination.

Looming over them, surrounded by dense vegetation, was the destroyed power plant. The walls were covered in cracks, with moss and vines growing over them. The windows were almost completely devoid of glass, only having a couple shards each. It was crumbled on many sides, but there was no way to enter other than the main entrance, which was being watched by two men. Ash and his friends quickly hid behind a bunch of nearby bushes before the guards could see them.

Said guards were wearing a dull green bodysuit with a gray metallic chestplate, gauntlets, boots, belt and helmet, with more Omega symbols on them. The helmets had an orange visor-like monocle

that covered a single eye of their faces. While not exactly the same, it was a uniform Ash and Serena had seen before.

"Team Omega? What the hell are they doing here?" Ash whispered, narrowing his eyes at them.

"Do you know those guys?" Natalie whispered.

"Yeah. They're a group of Pokemon traffickers. Though I'm with Ash, what could they want from a place like this?" Serena wondered.

"I don't care. All I know is that Bonnie is somewhere there, and I'm not leaving without her," Ash declared. Pikachu nodded energetically.

"We should return to somewhere with a signal and call dad, so he and his rangers can take care of this," Vitor suggested.

Ash, however, shook his head. "They may take time to arrive, and when they do, Team Omega might have fled with Bonnie in tow," Ash said.

"Understood," Natalie said, as she, Vitor and Serena did as instructed. "Though, how are we going to enter? We need to take those guards out."

"Those helmets have radios that can be used to alert their companions. We not only have to take the two of them at once, but do so without letting them warn their buddies," Ash said.

Serena smirked, as she held a pokeball in each hand. "Leave that to me."

...

Clemont paced back and forth in one of the plant's break rooms. This one only had a few chairs, Lilia taking one of them, her Buneary sitting on her lap, a table, and a single vending machine. From time to time, Clemont would stop and look through the only window, only to be greeted by the same image of greenery being pelted by the

rain. Then, he checked his Pokegear for any missed calls, only to sigh when there was none.

He then proceeded to repeat the cycle again.

"Nothing?" Lilia asked, sharing some of Clemont's worry, while she stroked her Pokemon's head.

"No. No missed calls nor messages. And if I call them, the same automatic message about their numbers not being available," Clemont said.

"Well... you saw how strong Ash is, right? As long as Bonnie is with him, she'll be okay," Lilia reassured. "There's also Serena and the twins."

"Yeah. At least the GPS signal still works," Clemont said, checking such a function in his pokegear. The last time he did, the three of them were together. Hopefully they'll be heading back to the new power plant. Unfortunately, what he saw didn't bring him any comfort. "What!?"

"What? What's going on?" Lilia asked, worried, as she quickly got up, almost pushing Buneary to the floor.

"Ash and Serena's signals come from the old plant... but Bonnie's signal has disappeared!"

...

"Well done, you two. Your duets are simply unmatched," Serena said, as she returned Chicaoatl and Selkid to their pokeballs. Thanks to Selkid's Sing and Chicaoatl's Grass Whistle, they were able to put the two guards to sleep without giving them the chance to alert the grunts inside.

"Hey, these guys are carrying zip ties!" Natalie said, after frisking one of the sleeping grunts.

"Great. Let's use them to restrain them," Vitor said.

As the twins placed the sleeping, helmetless bodies of the two Team Omega grunts under several bushes, hiding them from sight, Ash watched how Pikachu disabled said helmets with a slight discharge of electricity. Even if they woke up, the grunts wouldn't be able to tell their friends of their arrival.

"Let's go," Ash said.

Led by the older boy, the group, Geigeroach included, crossed the door-less entrance to the nuclear power plant. Pure darkness and an eerie silence welcomed them, though after a few moments, their eyes accustomed to the darkness. Then again, it would be hard to advance with so little visibility. Natalie then took out a pokeball.

"I think Raptorch could provide us with some light. Come-" Natalie was about to say, but Serena grabbed her wrist before the younger girl could call her starter. "Huh?"

"If we use light, any Team Omega grunt patrolling the area will see us from afar," Serena whispered. "I know it will be hard to navigate this place in the dark, but we have no choice."

Natalie regretfully nodded, and clipped the pokeball back on her belt.

They continued their travel through the ruined plant in silence. Aside from the lack of visibility, the place was so warm they were starting to sweat, and the heavy air was making breathing somewhat difficult. A reminder that, even if the radiation levels were low enough to be harmless, this was the place of a nuclear meltdown.

After ten minutes of excruciating silence, they heard something, something that sounded like human voices. Soon after that, light followed.

"Somebody's coming! Hide!" Ash commanded, as he and the rest of the group hid behind a large, rundown machine, almost as big as a

truck. As they waited, they heard the voices growing louder and clearer, until they saw a pair of Team Omega grunts, the two of them pushing pallets with metallic boxes in it, with louds growling noises coming from inside them. The boxes had slots on one of their sides, revealing something black and green inside.

"Are those... Nuclear Pokemon?" Serena whispered.

"... and I can't wait to get out of here. This place gives me the creeps!" one of the Team Omega grunts complained.

"Come on, the Professor said it was safe to go, so don't worry," his partner replied.

"Professor?" Ash repeated, and frowned. What kind of self respecting professor would associate with a group of thieving thugs like that? That was, before the memory of Professor Sebastian and Dr. Namba returned to his mind, a harsh reminder that not all scientists were as kind hearted as good old Professor Oak.

"If I find out I became sterile because of this, I'm going to murder somebody," the first grunt replied.

"Why do you care? It's not like any girl is going to let you nab her, haha!" his partner replied, laughing, before the first grunt punched him in the shoulder.

"Also, why are we even carrying these little freaks?" the first grunt said, tapping one of the boxes, the Nuclear Pokemon inside growling in response. "Do you think anybody is going to pay anything for them?"

"Why not?"

"Come on! Do you think these little fuckers can be trained to obey a trainer? All these things do is to viciously attack anything that's not them," the first grunt complained.

"I'm sure the Professor will find a way to bend them to his will," the second grunt replied. "I heard the higher ups talking about a new gadget that can brainwash Pokemon into absolute obedience. Maybe they can use it to rein in the little fuckers."

"I've been hearing that same bullshit story for years, yet we have to see any evidence of that," the first grunt replied. "Let's face it, the Professor hit a roadblock. That's why he sent us here to raid that secret underground lab of his, to see if he can salvage anything that Lucille chick was working on."

"Whatever. It's not our place to question his orders, just carrying them out," the second grunt replied, seemingly tired of his partner's whining. "Now let's keep going. The sooner we finish this task, the sooner we can get out of this forsaken place."

The two grunts continued walking, until they disappeared behind a corner. After a few minutes, once Ash and the others were sure they were far enough as not to be heard, they finally abandoned their hiding place.

"Did... did you guys hear the same thing I did?" Vitor asked, stammering. "Mom worked for Team Omega... and she had a secret lab under this plant?"

"I don't know but..." Natalie replied, sounding doubtful. "Dad sometimes said that he was sure the meltdown wasn't an accident. That... that may explain it..."

"Sorry to interrupt, but we have no time to ponder over that. Bonnie comes first," Ash reminded them. "If what those grunts said is true, then they must have taken her to said lab. Come on, let's see if we can find it."

"Let's take the direction those men came from," Serena suggested. Everybody nodded in agreement.

Their trek through the ruined plant continued in silence for another five minutes, until they reached a fork. The hallway split into three ways.

"Where to?" Natalie whispered.

Vitor looked at a sign on a wall, faded and corroded, but still legible. The three ways lead to the reactor control room, the fuel storage, and the steam discharge valves.

"Now, if you were to put a secret lab under the plant, which of those places would be better for an entrance?" Vitor asked, before he remembered something. "Wait... didn't Cameron say that mom designed the reactor and worked on it?"

"Yes. Should we check it first?" Natalie asked.

"Not that we don't have any other leads," Ash agreed.

Their choice proved to be a good one, as while they walked, they saw that there was some light coming from the room at the end of the hallway. As they got closer, they could hear some voices. They couldn't make out what they were saying, but it sounded like more Team Omega grunts. Trying to be as stealthy as possible, the group of four humans and two Pokemon approached the door-less control room, and could see another two grunts, bored out of their minds.

Ash nodded at Pikachu, who smirked maliciously as he nodded back, before jumping from his shoulder and scurried into the control room.

"Hey what the-"

"PikaCHUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUU!"

The room lit with yellow light as a loud crackle could be heard, followed by the sound of two bodies hitting the floor. The four humans and Geigeroach entered the control room, where they could

see the two Team Omega grunts, wisps of smoke coming from their burned clothes, lying on the ground, unconscious. Once again, Natalie and Vitor took the zip lines they were carrying to immobilize them.

"Your guess was an accurate one," Serena said, as she pointed out at the open trapdoor in the middle of the floor, a series of step irons leading down below.

Natalie let out a whistle. "Boy this surely goes deep! I can't even see the floor!"

"So, how are we going down? Because there might be more guards down there," Vitor pointed out.

"Maybe we could send a Pokemon to scout for us," Serena suggested. "Which one of us has a really stealthy Pokemon?"

"Ro," before anybody could answer, Geigeroach took a step forward.

"You want to do this?" Ash asked. The Radroach Pokemon nodded.

"Hey, that's a good idea! If the Team Omega grunts see him, they won't link him to us," Natalie pointed out.

"I doubt Geigeroach offered because of that, but it's a solid plan," Ash said, before looking at the large Bug-type in the eyes. "Be careful down there. If you see something, come quickly back to us, understood?"

"Geig," Geigeroach nodded, as the Nuclear Pokemon descended the iron steps. After a couple seconds, he disappeared within the darkness of the tunnel.

After a few minutes that felt like hours, the Radroach Pokemon climbed back, and gestured for them to come down, confirming it was safe. Wasting no time, Ash went first, followed by Natalie and Serena, with Vitor coming down last.

Once they were all down, the very first thing they noticed is that, unlike the plant above them, this place had functioning lights, despite looking long abandoned. Wordlessly, Ash moved forward, his three friends and Geigeroach following him. While the illumination was a welcomed change from having to navigate the darkness of the plant above, it was a constant reminder that this place had people on it.

Even if it apparently had survived the nuclear meltdown from a decade ago, time had not been kind to this laboratory: the painting of the walls was almost completely gone, leaving the metallic walls exposed and vulnerable to rust. Small puddles were scattered around the area here and there. The rooms of the laboratory appeared to be untouched, but they were covered in thick layers of dust, and the glass of the cabinets were so faded, it was impossible to see what was behind them.

"What was mom doing here...?" Natalie asked, looking around, though no one answered her.

"I don't know, but between this and those Team Omega guys' interest in the place, I have the lingering feeling that the nuclear meltdown wasn't an accident," Vitor pointed out, rubbing his arms as a chill crossed his body.

"Ash, doesn't this place remind you to...?" Serena began.

"The Team Omega base north of Kevlar Town, yes," Ash replied before she could finish her question. "Only more run down and without their symbol everywhere."

"These Team Omega guys... are they dangerous? We've been avoiding them so far, but I don't think we'll be able to do that in a place like this," Vitor said. "Since I doubt they're keeping Bonnie unwatched."

"The grunts aren't that great. Individually or in groups of two or three, they aren't much of a threat," Ash began.

"I guess if they were good trainers, they wouldn't have joined a criminal organization as mere footsoldiers," Natalie said.

"The leaders, on the other hand, they're pretty dangerous," Ash continued. "The one I fought in Kevlar Town could easily match a Gym Leader. And I didn't fight him alone."

"Also, Team Omega equips their Pokemon with contraptions that increase their power, so be careful if you see a Pokemon wearing them," Serena added. "The sudden power increase comes at the cost of their bodies being far less resilient, so try to exploit that if you get to fight one of them."

"Good to--"

"PIKA!"

It all happened so fast, they took a couple seconds to process it. First, there was the sound of a metallic cable being unrolled, followed by Pikachu being snatched from Ash's shoulder by a mechanical hand with three fingers attached to a thick steel cord. The first thing that crossed Ash's mind was Team Rocket, but rather than the usual trio of buffoons, the ones who had taken Pikachu from him, now inside a cage not unlike those Nuclear Pokemon were being held inside, were a pair of Team Omega grunts.

"PIKACHU!" Ash yelled, as he dashed towards them.

"That's what happens when you keep your Pokemon outside of their pokeball, dumbass!" the grunt holding Pikachu's cage taunted.

"Corsola, use Reflect!" the other grunt said, tossing a pokeball.

The Coral Pokemon materialized in front of them, its eyes glowing, as a barrier appeared between the grunts and Ash just as he was about to catch them, and painfully slammed face first against the psychic construct.

"Ash!" Serena said, grabbing Ash as he bounced back.

"See ya later, kids! Thanks for the Pikachu!" the grunt laughed as he returned Corsola, and ran away with his partner.

"Don't worry, I've got this!" Natalie said, as she threw a pokeball forward. "Dearewl, Brick Break on that Reflect!"

The moment the Iron Horn Pokemon appeared before her, Dearewl jumped towards the Reflect and smashed it with one of its legs, glowing with a white light. The psychic barrier was shattered into a thousand pieces that quickly faded into nothingness.

"Thank you! Come on, we have to catch them!" Ash said, as he began to run, the other three people and two Pokemon running behind him. "I can still hear the sound of their steps!"

"Hey Ash, didn't that gadget they used to snatch Pikachu look a lot like Clemont's Aipom Arm?" Serena asked as she ran besides Ash.

"I don't know, I didn't notice!" Ash said, as he continued to run, his eyes focused forward. "Over there!"

The group entered inside a large, poorly lit chamber full of broken down machinery. They stopped in the middle, the chamber having no way out despite Ash being sure the grunts had gone through here.

They were startled by the sound of a door slamming behind them, and turning around, they realized they were trapped. Before they could call their Pokemon for help, four pokeballs seemingly dropped from the ceiling, releasing the same Pokemon each: a large butterfly-like creature with a green body, a pink underbelly, marron arms and legs ended in claws, pink wings and a pink bear-like face.

"Nimflora!" Vitor called.

"Nimwhat?" Ash repeated.

The Pokemon hovering over them, Nimflora, began to flap their wings, showering them with a blue sparkling powder.

Ash heard how his friends fell before the multiple Sleep Powder, their bodies hitting the cold metallic ground with a dry thud. Ash tried to fight it long enough to call one of his Pokemon for help, but sleep claimed him before he was able to.

...

Ash woke up all of sudden to the unpleasant feeling of some smelly liquid being sprayed in his face. The first thing his blurry eyes saw was somebody wearing armor with a spray on their hands. However, that wasn't important for the Pallet Town trainer.

"Pikachu!" Ash shouted, as he looked around, trying to locate his best friend, despite his blurry vision.

"Don't worry about your Pikachu. He's okay. For the time being," a female voice said in a tone dripping with false reassurance.

He realized that he had been on his feet the whole time, his arms behind his back, his wrists tied together with a zip line, while a pair of arms firmly held him in place. As his vision began to clear little by little, he realized that Serena, Bonnie, Vitor and Natalie were next to him as well, also restrained by people whom he identified as Team Omega grunts.

Wait a minute, Bonnie? Yeah, of course she would be here. The fact that she seemed unharmed brought Ash a little relief. In fact, unlike the others, her hands weren't tied behind her back. Guess because she was younger than them, not a trainer, or both.

The same pair of grunts that had stolen Pikachu were also there, shooting taunting smiles at him while holding the metallic, high-tech cage that Pikachu was trapped inside. There was another identical cage on the floor next to them, this one holding Dedenne.

"Ash, Ash!" he heard Serena call him. "Are you okay?"

"Y-Yes, I am," Ash replied somewhat weakly, as his eyes focused on his electric rodent. "Pikachu... !"

"CHUUUUUU! CHUUUUU!" The Mouse Pokemon was trying to break the cage with his Thunderbolts, but to no avail.

"This little one has quite the fighting spirit, doesn't he?" the grunt laughed. "Too bad these cages have been made to hold Nuclear Pokemon inside. There's no way he'll break out from the inside doing just that."

"Of course he won't. Those cages are a creation of mine, after all," the same female voice said.

Ash saw how a Team Omega member walked towards him: it was a woman in her late twenties, her teal hair very short on her right side but very long on her left side, falling down the left side of her face. She had eyes of the same color as her hair, and teal lipstick on her lips. Instead of a helmet, she was wearing a metallic band around her head with a gadget attached to her left ear with an orange visor covering her left eye. She was holding a large metallic case on her right hand.

"After how much Zebos rambled about you, I was dying to meet you," the woman replied. "The famous Ash Ketchum."

"Who are you?" Ash angrily asked.

"My name's Alina, Co-Captain of Team Omega's Beta Division," Alina introduced herself, before chuckling cruelly. "Not that that information is going to do you a lot of good. Anyway, it's great to have you here, Ash Ketchum and friends. We were waiting for you."

"You knew we were coming?" Serena asked.

"Of course. That's how we were able to set that trap with the Nimflora," Alina explained.

"But... we knocked out the guards before they could alert you!" Ash protested.

Alina threw her head back and cackled loudly. "And you think that's enough to disguise your intrusion? Dear, those guards have orders to report status every ten minutes. The moment that report didn't come, we contacted them. When we got no response, we knew they had been taken out and that you were here. That was our cue to set the trap up," she said, as she walked towards Bonnie and caressed her cheek with a gloved hand. "After all, it was only a matter of time before you came for your little companion."

"Where are we?" Ash heard Serena ask. "What is that thing?"

Indeed, Ash realized that they were no longer inside that chamber full of rundown machinery. Instead, they were now in a much bigger room, with lots of computers and consoles to the sides, all of them inactive except for one, which was being used by another Team Omega member, another woman who looked identical to Alina, only replacing all the teal in her hair, eyes and lips with reddish brown.

And in the middle of the room, in front of them, there was a massive... something. A large metallic contraption shaped like a cylinder, easily four meters in height and six in diameter. There were many tubes and cables coming in and out of the machine, as well as an armored door that reminded Ash of the doors banks had on their vaults.

Alina, however, ignored Serena's question. "Boy, Zebos is going to be so mad at us when he realizes that not only it was our division who took you out of the picture, but the one who took your Pokemon," Alina then waved the case in front of Ash as if to taunt him. "Especially that Greninja of yours. The Professor was very interested in it."

"You... you won't get away with this! No one who tried to steal our Pokemon got away with them!" Ash furiously retorted.

"Then I'll be the first one to do so," Alina said, before walking past him and Serena, towards the twins, who were glaring daggers at her. "Say, you're Lucille's kids, aren't you?"

"Yeah, what about it?" Natalie asked. "Did you know our mom or what?"

"Not personally, but I'm aware of her work," she said, before waving towards the large cylindrical contraption. "Her loss was such a tragedy. Team Omega had never been able to find another genius of her caliber to fill the void she left."

"Team Omega...?" Natalie repeated, flabbergasted.

"Liar! Our mother would never work for the likes of you!" Vitor snapped at her with such intensity, the grunt holding him down had to pull him back from the teal haired woman.

Alina threw her head back and laughed. "No? And what do you think she was doing here?" she asked, spreading her arms to motion the room. "Because this place we're standing on was her secret laboratory. Where she worked on her masterpiece. Something revolutionary, as she called it. And it was our boss who funded her project. Then, the meltdown happened.

"Unfortunately, we've been unable to recover it and finish it ourselves, with the Rangers keeping a tight cordon around this place. At least until they began to build the new power plant," Alina explained. "Not only was the cordon lifted, but all the security was focused on the new plant, allowing us to come here undetected and claim the project for ourselves. That would be, of course, if my dear sister is able to do her job. Anika, dear, you've been quite some time on that console, are you sure you know what you're doing?"

The other woman, Anika, turned around, and glared at her sister. "Hey, I'm going as fast as I can! So shut your trap and let me work, okay!?"

"Sorry dear, but given how much you boast about being the best hacker of Tandor, I thought this would be a piece of cake for you," Alina replied.

"Well, it would if these computers weren't so fucking prehistoric!" Anika said, as she continued to furiously type. "At least they have USB ports..."

"Whoa, she said a bad word!" Bonnie gasped.

"Anika, dear, can you moderate your language? There are kids present," Alina chided her in a faux-soft tone.

"Who the fuck cares if they hear me curse, didn't you say we were going to let them be torn apart by the Nuclear Pokemon outside?" Anika retorted. Ash saw all his friends blanching upon hearing that. "But yeah, it's a goddamned miracle that these computers still work at all. Shit, another error!"

"You know we can't be here forever, right? Sooner or later, somebody is going to come here looking for these kids," Alina reminded her sister. "So please, be mindful of the time."

"Come here then and try to crack these corrupted files open if you think it's so goddamned easy!" Anika fired back.

As the two sisters bickered, Ash began to look around, trying to find a way to escape their captors and rescue their Pokemon. The grunts holding them seemed to be amused by their captains' argument, but weren't holding them any less tight for it. But no matter where he looked, there was nothing he could use to his advantage, at least not as long as he was restrained. Nothing on the walls, nothing on the ground, nothing on the... ceiling?

There was something crawling on the ceiling. Something big, green and brown, and with many legs. Geigeroach! Geigeroach was there!

The Radorach Pokemon waved one of his legs at Ash. Ash shook his head, hoping the Pokemon would understand that he didn't want to attack just now. Geigeroach nodded, and remained still. Ash then lowered his head, thankful that the grunt holding him was still watching the sisters argue and hadn't realized that there was something on the ceiling. Okay, now he needed to wait for the appropriate moment for Geigeroach to ambush them.

"Yes, I fucking did it!" Anika cried in triumph. "I have access to the stasis tank!"

Stasis tank? That's what that giant contraption was?

"Good! Now open it, quickly!"

"Alright, 'Execute Restoration Process'? I think that's going to be a big fucking YES," Anika said, as her finger hit the last key with more energy than necessary.

That moment, the whole place trembled as the stasis tank hummed to life, followed by a multitude of beeps and hisses, as several led lights turned on with a green hue. Some worrying sparks jumped from the places cables were attached to. Alina stared at the metallic behemoth expectantly, as if waiting for something to happen. But her wait was unrewarded.

"Of course, a fucking loading bar. Estimated time: 17 minutes?" Anika read aloud.

"It would be better if the tank opened instantly, but that's some time frame we can afford to wait," Alina said. "Then again, we can use that time to-"

"Captains, captains! Do you copy?" Alina and Anika's earpiece cracked with the desperate call of a man. "We have an emergency

here!"

"I copy you, soldier. What kind of emergency?" Alina asked, her voice carrying a hint of worry.

"The Nuclear Pokemon! They're returning to the plant in droves! We can't hold them back! Send us reinforcements!" the grunt pleaded.

All the grunts present started to look at each other, clearly worried over an horde of Nuclear Pokemon heading their way.

"We can't send you reinforcements! Hold your position until we're done here!" Anika insisted.

"We can't-AAAAAAAAGH!" the grunt loudly screamed, making both women wince.

"Soldier! Soldier! Answer right now!" Anika demanded. But all she got was static.

Alina looked at the stasis tank. "Those Pokemon returned the moment we reactivated this thing. It is possible that-"

"GEIGEROACH, NOW!" Ash yelled, taking advantage of Team Omega's distraction over what was going on.

"Roach!"

Ash's cry came to the surprise of his friends and confusion to Team Omega, who wondered if they missed any of their Pokemon and where the attack would come from, none of them expecting the attack coming from above. As he landed, Geigeroach's four forelegs were glowing with a sickly green light typical of Nuclear moves, and slashed the two Team Omega grunts holding Serena and Bonnie.

"The Nuclear Pokemon! They're here!" one of the grunts keeping Pikachu and Dedenne yelled in panic, as he instinctively took a few steps back.

Taking advantage of the confusion, despite not being able to use his arms, Ash shook himself free of his captive and rammed towards the remaining grunt, slamming his shoulder against the man's chest. Ash winced in pain as his shoulder hit the metallic armor, but managed to knock the man backwards.

"Bonnie!" Ash yelled.

He didn't need to elaborate any further, as while Serena, now free of her restraints, grappled with her captor, and Geigeroach attacked more grunts who fumbled to draw their own Pokemon, Bonnie rushed towards the cages containing the two electric rodents, and pressing a switch to the side, they were opened, releasing them.

"Dedenne!" Bonnie shouted, as the Antennae Pokemon quickly ran out of the cage and into Bonnie's arms.

Pikachu, however, rushed towards Alina, smashing his small body against the woman with a powerful Quick Attack, knocking her backwards and making her drop her case, which opened upon hitting the ground, scattering the pokeballs inside across the room.

"Well done, Pikachu!" Ash praised. "Open all the pokeballs, quickly!"

"Sister!" Anika cried, before glaring at Pikachu, while holding a pokeball. "Oh, you're so going to pay for that, you filthy rat! Sableye, go!"

Pikachu, however, ignored Sableye and following Ash's instructions started to open the pokeballs one by one. From one it came Frosulo, from another Pancham, from another Aveden, from another Costraw, followed by Slothom...

This seemed to snap the Team Omega grunts out of their confusion, as they were finally able to call their own Pokemon. In a few seconds, the room they were in quickly turned into a chaotic battleground, with Pokemon trading attacks, while Ash and his

friends used their Pokemon to free themselves from their bindings, before recovering their now empty pokeballs.

"Geigeroach, quickly, pick Bonnie and take her outside the plant!" Ash told the Bug and Nuclear-type.

"Roach!" he nodded, as he easily hoisted Bonnie with his four arms and dashed out of the room, leaving the chaotic battle behind.

If the equipment inside the room was still functional despite a decade of lack of use and maintenance, it would no longer be the case now, as many attacks quickly landed on the computers and consoles spread around the place. Some of the attacks, though, landed on the stasis tank.

"Watch out, you idiots! Don't harm the tank until the restoration process is complete!" Alina shouted, losing her normally cool head. Unfortunately, none of her grunts were listening to her, too busy keeping the opposing Pokemon at bay. She reached out for a pokeball. "Gardevoir, go!"

As the Embrace Pokemon materialized, Ash could see that it was wearing a metallic headband with a red Omega symbol on it. The trainer from Kanto could tell it was another gadget similar to the Muscular Enhanced Zebos and Maury had used on their Pokemon.

And his suspicions proved to be correct when the teal haired woman pulled out a familiar remote, before pressing a button on it. "Psionic Enhancer, activate!"

Gardevoir flinched and closed its eyes shut, as the gadget hummed to life, the Omega symbol glowing red. The Psychic and Fairy-type looked as if it was having a major headache.

"Gardevoir, use Light Screen to protect-"

However, Alina's words died on her lips as a loud hiss echoed through the room. For a moment, the battle stopped, and all eyes

present moved towards the large stasis tank. Following that, there were many loud, screeching noises coming from behind, causing some Team Omega grunts to panic over fear that it was going to explode.

"What did you shitheads do!?" Anika shouted.

Then, much to everybody's surprise and no small amount of fear, the armored door of the stasis tank slowly slid open...

"Could it be...?" Anika asked.

... and a thick, green mist quickly poured from inside the tank, quickly flooding the place on it. Both human and Pokemon quickly found great difficulty to breathe, and began to cough loudly. All except Geigeroach, who seemed to be fine, and in fact was looking at everybody else a bit confused.

"Shit! This gas is radioactive as hell!" Anika complained, as information flashed on her one-eyed visor. "What gives? I thought all the radiation had dissipated already!"

"Of course it's radioactive!" Alina replied, as if stating something obvious, but didn't elaborate any further. "We can't remain here anymore. Gardevoir, Teleport us back to the submarine!"

"Vooooir... !" Gardevoir cried, and in a flash of light, all Team Omega members were gone, leaving Ash and his friends alone in the lab.

"We need to get out of this place as soon as possible!" Ash said, covering his mouth with one hand as he began to recall his Pokemon back to their pokeballs with the other. His friends quickly followed, until the only Pokemon outside was Pikachu, whom Ash placed inside his zipped up jacket.

Wasting no more breath on talking, the four trainers ran away from there while covering their mouth and nose with their hands. Despite not knowing where the stasis tank's room was in relation to the rest

of the lab, they quickly managed to find the main hallway, and from there, the iron steps that lead back to the reactor's control room in the power plant.

Unfortunately, the radioactive gas had leaked into the plant as well, the whole place looked an eerie green. Still, they had to soldier on if they wanted to live.

"Come on guys, just a little more!" Ash encouraged the other three.

Unfortunately, his words didn't have the intended effect. Ash heard the sound of a body hitting the floor, followed by Vitor crying his sister's name. Wordlessly, Ash helped Vitor carry Natalie, but soon, the Moki Town boy fell prey to the noxious effect of the radioactive fog, and fainted.

"A.. Ash... !" Serena said, her hand weakly pointing at something, before the Kalosian girl fell.

Ash was starting to feel woozy. Everything began to spin around him as his sense of balance eroded. His legs felt like jelly. He struggled to keep his eyes open. But he wasn't going to let this be the end of his adventure!

"Muuuuuunk..."

Ash turned around, and realized what was what Serena had pointed at: several Nuclear Pokemon advanced towards him and his unconscious friends, completely unaffected by the radioactive mist. A couple Chyinmunk, a Kinetmunk, and a pair of Costraw.

"Munk!"

The closest Chyinmunk lunged at Ash, but that moment Pikachu jumped from his jacket, and smacked the radioactive chipmunk with a powerful Iron Tail.

"Pikachu... no... !" Ash said, as he began to cough violently.

The Nuclear Pokemon realized that Pikachu was the bigger threat, and they all attacked him at once. While Pikachu would have wiped the floor with his enemies in normal circumstances, the radioactive gas was quickly chipping the electric rodent's health away. Pikachu's moves quickly became slower and sloppier, he began to cough as breathing became more and more difficult, and his senses quickly dulled. In no time, Pikachu went from protecting Ash, to becoming the Nuclear Pokemon's punching bag, only dishing out maybe one strike for every ten he got.

"Pikachu... leave him... !" Ash wanted to help his beloved starter Pokemon, but before he could give another step, he couldn't hold anymore, and his body collapsed on the floor.

The last thing his eyes saw before everything turned dark was a blurry vision of Pikachu enduring a barrage of Nuclear-type attacks.

...

The muffled sound of voices talking woke Ash up. He tried to open his eyes, blinking slowly to get used to the light. As his vision became less blurry, so did his hearing, the voices becoming something he could identify.

"Ash!" he heard somebody calling his name.

As his senses slowly returned to him, he realized that he was lying on a bed, covered by white sheets, in what appeared to be a hospital room. He was no longer wearing his jacket nor his sneakers. Serena, Vitor and Natalie were in other beds as well, though they looked to be awake for some time already. Clemont, Bonnie, Lilia and Cameron were also there, the former two next to him.

There was also Geigeroach, standing next to a corner, completely still.

"Ash! You're awake!" Bonnie squealed, prompting Clemont to shush her for doing so.

"How are you feeling, Ash?"

"W-What happened?" Ash weakly asked.

"We worried when Bonnie's GPS signal disappeared. Then all of yours, and realized that you must have gone inside the old power plant," Clemont began.

Ash opened his mouth to explain why, but Clemont held a hand. "It's okay, Bonnie already explained everything that happened, including the secret underground laboratory, what Team Omega was doing there, and the role Lucille apparently played in all of this..." Cameron said the last part as if it hurt him physically.

"The Rangers have already been informed," Lilia interceded

"I lead a few men into the old power plant," Cameron said, before grimacing. "Imagine our faces when we found the four of you lying on the floor, not sure if you were still alive or not."

"Fortunately, we were on time. Cameron and his men brought you here, and the medics were able to heal you before anything irreversible could happen," Lilia said, smiling. "You might feel weak for a day or two, but after that, you'll be good as new."

"Still, it was a miracle that those Nuclear Pokemon didn't hurt you," Cameron continued. "If it wasn't for that Pikachu of yours holding the line like that-"

"Pikachu!" Ash shouted all of sudden, as the memories of his starter Pokemon defending him against the Nuclear Pokemon at his own expense made their painful return to his mind. "Where is Pikachu!? Is he okay!?"

As if on cue, a Nurse Joy flanked by an Aromatisse and a Miasmedic entered the room. The nurse was pushing a small stretcher with Pikachu on it. Ash was filled with relief upon seeing that Pikachu appeared to be fine.

Appeared, however, being the key word. Upon watching him further, Pikachu didn't look like his usual self. He looked thin, weak, tired... as if his spark had been permanently snuffed.

"Your Pikachu..." Nurse Joy began, stopping to choose the best words to use what Ash knew were bad news. "The fact that he spent a lot of time fighting Nuclear Pokemon while breathing that radioactive mist and taking so many Nuclear attacks... had Cameron and his men been a couple hours late, Pikachu would have been turned into a Nuclear Pokemon."

There was a collective gasp, and Ash paled upon imagining his best friend turned into one of the radioactive aberrations that he had seen today.

"But... he's okay now, right? He's out of danger?" Ash asked, looking the nurse in the eye, his voice cracking with desperation.

The way Nurse Joy looked at him didn't fill him with any hope, though. "I have good news and bad news. Which one do you want to hear first?"

Ash could feel how a huge lump formed on his stomach. No, that wasn't what he was hoping to hear. Still, Nurse Joy said there was good news, so maybe it wasn't so bad?

"The good news," Ash said. "I... I need to hear something good."

"The good news is that none of the aftereffects of the exposure to both a radioactive environment and the harm taken by Nuclear-type attacks will be permanent," Nurse Joy explained, and indeed, Ash felt a little better hearing that. "If Pikachu rests and takes the medicines I'm about to prescribe him on a regular basis, his health will recover to the point before all this madness happened."

"That's great to hear!" Ash said, now a little more hopeful. "What is the bad news, then?"

"The recovery process might take a long time. And as long as it lasts, Pikachu won't be able to battle without risking his health," Nurse Joy sympathetically said. "I'm sorry. I've been told how close you are to your Pikachu, but I'm afraid you won't be able to use him for your Gym Battles for the foreseeable future."

Ash felt as if something had knocked out all the air out of his lungs. Pikachu has been his permanent traveling companion since the beginning of his journey. He had played an integral role in every league Ash took part in.

Yet Tandor might be the first League where Pikachu wouldn't take part in.

"Ash, I..." Clemont began, walking closer to Ash and placing a hand on his friend's shoulder. "I'm very sorry for Pikachu. This must be a huge blow for both of you."

Clemont had no idea how right he was. Still, Ash decided to push those gloomy thoughts away, and focus on the positive. He shook his head, and smiled. "It's okay, Clemont. The important part is that Pikachu is okay, and will get better over time."

Pikachu jumped out of the stretcher into Ash's lap, and gave him an apologetic look. "Piiika?"

Ash could tell that Pikachu felt bad over not being able to help him on his badge quest anymore. "It's okay, buddy. There will be more leagues, but there's only one you. If I had lost you..." Ash decided not to follow that train of thought, and he patted Pikachu on the head. "Plus, you already helped me win two badges, so it's not like you haven't done anything. I doubt any of my other Pokemon would have taken down that Mega Gyarados as you did!"

"Pi..." Pikachu said, feeling a little proud at such victory.

"So instead, let's take this as a vacation, alright?" Ash asked.

"Pikapi?" Pikachu asked, a bit worried.

"Nah, of course I plan to keep you with me, even if you can't fight. It's not like we can't continue traveling together, " Ash reassured the Mouse Pokemon. "I can like, do like Clemont and send your empty pokeball to Oak's lab if I need a sixth battler. That's it, unless you want to go back to Oak's in order to rest...?"

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu cried, shaking his head profusely.

Ash chuckled. "Heh, figured as much," then he looked at Bonnie, and asked. "Oh, I almost forgot! What about you, Bonnie? Did Geigeroach escort you outside?"

"You can bet he did! He ran so fast, and dodged every other Nuclear Pokemon that got in our way!" Bonnie excitedly recounted the tale of their escape. "Before we could realize, Dedenne and I were already outside!"

"Nene!" Dedenne agreed.

"What about Geigeroach? Did he leave after that or...?" Ash asked.

"Oh, right, you weren't awake when it happened," Clemont said in realization. "See..."

...

After we took the four of you here to treat both you and your Pokemon, Bonnie told me about Geigeroach, and the role he had played in saving her. She asked for us to bring him with us and give him some food as a reward. A request nobody rejected, given how much that Pokemon had helped us.

As he ate his plate of food, I wanted to personally thank him, so I approached him with the PST, with Bonnie coming as well.

" Hey there Geigeroach," I asked him. "Is the food good?"

" Geige, ge," he replied. [This food is nothing like the berries you can find around these parts. The taste is incredible].

" I'm glad you like it. It was the least we could do with how much you helped us," Clemont said.

" Geige, ro, geige," he said. [Perhaps I should offer my help to more humans, if this is the reward that entails.]

" Hehe," Bonnie chuckled.

" Geigeroach, ro?" he asked. [I am curious. Where did you find this food? It doesn't look like something you can find anywhere on this island.]

" Mostly because it isn't. It's a special food prepared by us humans for Pokemon, using many different ingredients," Clemont explained. "That way, we can give our Pokemon food that's both tasty and gives them plenty of nutrients."

" Gei... geige, geigero, roach," he said. [I see. In that case, would it be possible for us to make an exchange?]

" An... exchange?" Clemont asked.

" Geigero, geige, gei, roach," Geigeroach nodded. [I will continue using my abilities to provide you with services and assistance. And in return, you'll give me more of this food. I saw that it's possible to bind yourself to one human through a certain, sphere-shaped artifact. Maybe we could do that?]

" You want Clemont to capture you?" Bonnie asked, visibly excited.

" You really want to come with me?" Clemont asked.

Geigeroach nodded. "Gei, geige, roach." [In the past, I used to belong to a swarm. But one by one, all of my kin fell before the unhinged ones. Now I'm the last of my kind. If I remain here, I don't

know how long I will last on my own. Please let me become a member of your swarm.]

No more words needed to be spoken. Clemont pulled out an empty pokeball, and brought it close to Geigeroach. The Radroach Pokemon touched its central button with one of his arms, and allowed himself to be absorbed by the ball, which dinged immediately.

" Yay! We made a new friend!" Bonnie cheered.

" Today's a great day for science," Clemont said in a rather soft and subdued manner. "Welcome to the team, Geigeroach."

...

"And thus, Geigeroach is now a member of my team," Clemont finished his recounting, as he held Geigeroach's pokeball with one hand.

"Geigeroach is a great Pokemon," Ash said, looking at the Bug and Nuclear-type Pokemon fondly. "If it wasn't for him, we wouldn't have escaped from Team Omega either. I'm sure he'll be a great addition to your team."

...

Ash, Serena and the twins remained the rest of the day in the clinic, since the doctors wanted to make sure there were no aftereffects from the radiation exposure before giving them a clean bill. Thankfully, with the exception of Pikachu, their other Pokemon were fine, since the pokeballs protected them from the ambient radiation.

They were released the next morning. After bidding Clemont goodbye, Ash, Serena, Bonnie and the twins boarded the same ship that brought them to the island the previous day, which would return them to Bealbeach.

The rains had finally stopped, and the sun shone on the blue sky, unmolested by any cloud, so most of the ship's passengers were on the deck, basking in the sunlight as they watched the sea and the Pokemon in it.

Not Ash, thought. He was in the ship's living room, sitting on one of the couches with Pikachu on his lap. Despite what he said the previous day, he still felt a little crestfallen over the fact that he might not be able to use Pikachu for the remainder of the journey through Tandor. Pikachu would still be with him, but it didn't feel the same.

"Ash?"

The boy turned towards the room's door, and saw Serena standing there, looking at him with worried eyes.

"Are you okay?" Serena asked. "I didn't see you on the deck and wondered where you were..."

"Yeah, I am," Ash reassured her. He then moved aside, making room for her to take a seat. Serena took the unsaid invitation, and sat next to him. "What about you, Serena? The Bealbeach City contest is tomorrow. After all of this, do you feel like taking part?"

"I don't see why not. The doctors said that I'm fine. And I think I could use the contest as a distraction," Serena admitted. "Plus, I talked with Vitor, and he plans to take part in it as well."

Ash didn't say anything, the two of them falling into a moment of comfortable silence. Serena then began to gently scratch Pikachu under one of his ears, making the rodent purr softly.

"Hey Ash?" Serena asked.

"Yes?"

"After the contest is over... can we just stay on Bealbeach for a bit?" Serena asked. "Bealbeach... is a really nice city, isn't it? And it's not

that we're in a hurry. We could use a couple days off. No training. No gym battles or contests. Just... us, and our Pokemon, having fun and relaxing."

"I can agree to that," Ash replied. "Pikachu could use some rest more than anybody."

Serena smiled and nodded. Then, much to her surprise and growing worry, a scowl developed over his face.

"What were those Team Omega criminals doing there?" Ash asked all of a sudden, his fists clenching in anger. "It's all their fault. We lost sight of Bonnie because of those Nuclear Pokemon they displaced from their lair that attacked us. And then they kidnapped Bonnie, forcing us to go to the plant. And then they opened that... that thing, which flooded the place with toxic gas and drew all the wild Nuclear Pokemon back to the plant..."

Serena placed a hand on Ash's knee. She opened her mouth, probably to say some gentle reassuring, but then she frowned as if a thought crossed her mind. "Now that I think about it... what were those guys looking down there? Because there's no way they went that far just for a tank full of toxic gas."

"Who knows. Perhaps it's nothing. I mean, that place has been abandoned for a decade, right? So maybe whatever they were looking for it was no longer there," Ash reasoned.

"Guess we'll never know," Serena replied. "Then again, maybe it's for the better this way."

...

Somewhere dark

She opened her eyes, but could hardly discern what was in front of her. She had no memory of this place, yet at the same time there was a feeling of familiarity that she couldn't shake off.

How long has it been? Months? Years? Centuries? After all the time she had spent suspended, time was something she no longer held any meaning to her. Besides, it's not like there's anybody she was supposed to return to, right?

Or... there was?

Where was she? Who was she? What was she supposed to do?

She didn't know. Her mind was a jumbled mess. She didn't know where she was, who she was, or if the thoughts that pounded on her aching brain were her own to begin with. Everything was chaos and confusion, nothing made any sense. Not just time, reality itself was starting to lose any meaning as well.

She could feel her sanity slowly slipping away with the last of her memories...

" MOTHER, I HUNGER."

Then, as if somebody just flipped on a switch, everything changed.

Her thoughts were no longer chaotic, as her mind began to put them in order.

Time didn't matter, only the here and now did.

Reality recovered its meaning, allowing her sanity to crawl back into her mind, which was slowly rebuilding itself, clarity of thought returning as it did.

And then, she remembered who she was: a mother.

She now had a purpose, something that could drive her actions, something that would give her chaotic existence a meaning.

Her child needed her. She would protect her child. She would nurture her child. She would see her child grow big and strong.

And she would annihilate those who would get in her way.

Author's Note: Well, a lot of stuff to unpack, so let's begin, shall we?

First of all, do you **REALLY** think I was going to kill Bonnie off? Come on, even if this fic is going to be darker than the anime, it's not going to be **THAT** dark. And if I were to kill anybody, Bonnie would be among the last of my choices.

The more observant readers, at least those with enough game knowledge to identify the Pokemon that allegedly attacked Bonnie as Geigeroach, correctly realized that Geigeroach is one of the few Nuclear Pokemon that's not mindlessly feral since Nuclear is one of his natural types. I admit I cheated a little, since you can't find Geigeroach on Nuclear Plant Epsilon, but it's not like the anime respects Pokemon locations from the games all the time. And with his capture, Clemont's team is now complete! Also, regarding that comment about being the last of his kind, it means that he's the last Geigeroach in the island, not the last Geigeroach at all. There are many other Geigeroach out there.

As it was foreshadowed in the end of the Garlikid chapter, Team Omega is here causing more trouble. You see, aside from filling the void of antagonist until the canon villain shows up, I also needed them to adapt the plot better. In the game, once you're dropped on the island, you're just told to explore it. However, in order to keep the plot moving and being allowed to leave, you must enter the ruined power plant, explore it until you get to the tank and activate the restoring process. What follows is the same as what happened here, the room fills with toxic gas, you're attacked by Nuclear Pokemon suddenly going (even more) berserk, lose consciousness and wake up in the Rest House after being rescued by Cameron in the nick of time, before finally being put on a boat back to the continent. The

thing is... why would Ash and co. do such a thing? Don't worry, Team Omega is here to do that for them.

Also, fun fact, Anika's original name was Anya. Then I started watching Spy x Family, and I simply couldn't have a villain with that name.

Needless to say, I'm taking a lot of liberties with how nuclear radiation works, or else the whole story would end with its protagonists dying horribly. Oh, regarding what those grunts said, don't worry, Ash and co. aren't sterile now because of radiation exposure.

Still, radiation isn't entirely harmless, as Pikachu just found out. Sorry for those miffed by the idea of Pikachu being benched, but I needed a victim to bring home the kind of dangers our heroes are going to face from now onwards. And funnily enough, my original idea was much darker: Cameron would rescue Ash and co., but Pikachu would be nowhere to be found, only to reappear later as a Nuclear Pokemon. Ash would battle him a number of times through the story, before finally capturing him back and restoring him to normal. But in the end I scrapped the idea since it would severely bring the mood down way too much. I simply can't see Ash just going on with his journey as if nothing happened with his best friend first vanishing without trace and then turned into a radioactive monster. Still, even if Pikachu will be benched for some time, he will be with Ash and will help him in other ways.

Next chapter, Serena will take part in her next contest, hoping to win her third ribbon.

Thanks a lot to 61394, Fox McCloude, cricketlaxwolvesbandy, MegaSalamence64, Viroro-kun and hirowriter for their reviews last chapter, and special thanks to Viroro-kun for his work as a betareader, whose edits and suggestions made this chapter so much better.

Check the Ao3 version for a picture of Alina, Anika and Beta Division.

Alright, I think this note is long enough. Make sure to leave a review, and see you next chapter ;)

Between a Rock and an Even Harder Rock

Chapter 26:

Between a Rock and an Even Harder Rock

Bealbeach City

"Alright Chicoatl, Energy Ball! And you Sylveon, combine it with Shadow Ball!" Serena called.

Both Chicoatl and Sylveon formed spheres of energy, one vibrant green, the other pitch black surrounded by eerie purple, and fired them at their opponents, Ash's Frosulo and Aveden. The two spheres of power merging into a single one, much larger, swirling with brushes of green and purple.

"Not bad, but those kinds of combinations have a pretty big weakness! Aveden, get behind Frosulo, and Frosulo, use Protect!" Ash commanded.

Aveden hid behind the Ice Crystal Pokemon as a green energy barrier formed around the latter. The combination attack crashed against it, resulting in a spectacular explosion of green and purple lights, which also raised a cloud of sand, but ultimately failed to cause any harm to the opposing Pokemon.

After being dropped back on Bealbeach, Ash, Serena and Bonnie decided to spend the morning relaxing a bit. After lunch, though, she and Ash had been training a lot in order to make sure Serena would be ready for her next contest. The battleground in the Pokemon Center was being used by other people, no doubt many of them coordinators, so they had to move to the beach in order to train. Bonnie would come and go, watching the two of them spar, before leaving to play in the sand or in the water with the Pokemon they weren't using to spar.

The only Pokemon doing neither was Pikachu, who was lying on his back on a small towel, looking a little bored.

"Great! Now, Frosulo, use Powder Snow, and Aveden, Air Cutter!" Ash said.

"Sylveon, launch Chicoatl in an arc against Frosulo, and use Protect yourself!" Serena shouted.

"What?"

"Syl!"

Sylveon wrapped all four of her feelers around Chicoatl's body, raising her above her head, and flinging her against their opponents, just as she erected the same defensive barrier that Frosulo had used earlier. And as the two attacks smashed harmlessly against the shield, Chicoatl flew in an arc towards Frosulo.

"Chicoatl, Drill Peck, now!" Serena shouted.

"Chi!"

Chicoatl's peck glowed with a white light, doubling in size, before it started to spin like a drill.

"Frosulo, Protect!" Ash shouted.

Frosulo tried to use Protect again, but the Ice Crystal Pokemon was only able to create an unstable barrier that flickered for a couple seconds before disappearing completely, just as the Drill Peck smashed against Frosulo.

"SUUUUUU!" Frosulo cried in pain, the super effective attack cutting deep.

"Frosulo, are you okay?" Ash asked.

"F-Fro!" Frosulo replied, turning his body towards Ash, and nodding.

"Great," Ash said, before looking at Serena. "Nice maneuver there, baiting me to use Protect so it wouldn't work the second time! And great use of Sylveon's feelers!"

"If there's one thing you learn from showcases, it's that Pokemon can do plenty of things with their body parts that do not involve regular attacks," Serena explained, smiling proudly.

"I wasn't expecting that you'd train Chikoatl to learn Drill Peck. When did she learn it?" he asked.

"Not long ago. We've been training a lot to learn some new moves. More moves means more options for combinations and displays" Serena said. She then looked at the horizon, where the sun was starting to set. "We've been training quite a lot. How about if we call it a day? I don't want my Pokemon to get too tired for tomorrow."

"Fine by me," Ash said, as he returned Frosulo and Aveden to their pokeballs. "Everybody, return! We're going back to the Pokemon Center!"

All the Pokemon obediently heeded Ash's call and returned to their trainers, Bonnie not so much, but in the end she relented. They returned their Pokemon to their pokeballs, gathered their belongings, and headed back into the city, Pikachu perched on his usual spot on Ash's shoulder.

"So, how are you feeling, buddy?" Ash asked.

"Pi..." Pikachu said, almost in a groan, as he crossed his tiny arms.

"I know it must be boring, but it's for the best," Ash insisted. "But you heard Nurse Joy. The more you rest and relax, the faster you'll recover."

"Yeah, your health comes first, Pikachu," Serena added.

Pikachu sighed in defeat, seemingly accepting the humans' words.

"What about you, Serena? Do you really feel like doing a contest?" Ash asked.

"I think you asked me this before, and the answer is the same," Serena replied.

"I just wanted to make sure you aren't doing this out of obligation," Ash continued. "I know coordinators are on a schedule, but it would be okay if you skipped this contest. You have two ribbons already and there are still many other contest-"

"Ash," Serena gently cut him. "I'm fine, I promise. If I really felt sick or something, I assure you I wouldn't take part in the contest."

"Alright. If you say so," her answer seemed to placate Ash for the time being.

"But that's not going to stop you from asking her again in the morning, doesn't it?" Bonnie piped in.

"Eeh... perhaps?"

...

The very next day, the trio of Ash, Serena and Bonnie spent the morning relaxing and walking around the large city, and after lunchtime, they headed towards the Contest Hall. While Ash and Bonnie went to buy their tickets, Serena entered the Hall through the back door, as every coordinator did.

"Hey, over here!" Natalie said, waving at them. Ash and Bonnie quickly went to join them. "Heh, I was wondering when you'd show up."

"Worried that Serena might have second thoughts about coming?" Ash asked.

"A little given what happened. I wasn't really sure if Vitor would be okay enough to compete, but he said that he felt fine," Natalie said.

"Well, the doctors said we were good to go. If they say they're okay, we should trust them," Ash replied.

"Anyway, how about I buy your tickets as well? That way you won't have to wait through the queue and I can buy our seats next to each other so we can watch the contest together," Natalie explained.

"Really? That's great!" Bonnie beamed.

Even if Ash and Bonnie didn't have to stay in a line, the wait for Natalie to come with the tickets wasn't that much better. After half an hour, the brown haired girl showed up to give them their tickets, and the three of them entered the hall.

"Well, here we are," Ash said, as he, Bonnie and Natalie took their seats.

"This feels so odd, being here without Clemont," Bonnie lamented.

"I know. It may take some time to get used too," Ash said, before patting Bonnie on the back. "Now, Serena is going to need you to be at your best in order to cheer her on, so let's try to keep a positive attitude, okay?"

"... okay," Bonnie said with a nod.

That moment, the halls' lighting dimmed into total darkness and people stopped chattering among themselves, followed by Jillian walking into the performance area as the spotlight focused on her. The three usual judges also walked to their seats.

"Ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to the Bealbeach City Pokemon Contest! I'm your host, Jillian Meridian," she began, and the crowd exploded into loud cheers. "Thank you! Also give a warm welcome to the judges that will evaluate our wonderful coordinators: Bealbeach City's own Nurse Joy, the Venesi City Gym Leader Rosalind, and the S-Class connoisseur Ambrose Reigns!"

After people applauded the judges, Jillian went to explain the rules of the Pokemon Contests for those in the public not aware of them. Like in previous contests, coordinators would have to use two Pokemon for both the Appeal Round and Contest Battles. She finished by showing the ribbon the contest winner would take with him or her, before introducing the very first contestant, beginning the Appeal Round.

Coordinators walked in and out of the arena one after the other, their Pokemon doing all kinds of performances. Rosalind and Nurse Joy often passed a positive judgment even to those who didn't appear so good, while Ambrose, in his usual schtick, verbally tore down the coordinators' display with his unfiltered speech.

"I'm going to find who the hell thought it was a good idea to hire that imbecile," Natalie seethed.

"Let's welcome our next coordinator! From Vaniville Town in Kalos, Serena Gabena!" Jillian said with her usual enthusiasm, as Serena walked into the stage, wearing her white and pink ballgown dress.

"Braixen, Minicorn, go!" she said, throwing two pokeballs into the air.

The capture devices opened, a torrent of flames pouring to the first one, before it formed into the shape of the Fox Pokemon, while the second one released Minicorn among a storm of pink hearts and golden stars.

"Mincorn, Fairy Wind around yourselves! And Braixen, Flamethrower alongside it!" Serena began.

"Brail!" Braixen cried, her wand igniting, as Minicorn neighed.

Mincorn's horn began to glow pink, as a gust of pink sparkly mist began to blow around them, forming a tornado of the same color. Braixen aimed her wand at the tornado, releasing a stream of flames that were carried away by the wind, forming a spinning spiral of flame that surged upwards.

"Now Braixen, Hidden Power! Shape it like a spiral staircase!"
Serena ordered.

"Xen!" Braixen said, summoning the rainbow colored orbs, and launched them upwards, placed in the pattern Serena had requested.

"And Minicorn, Charge Beam on the Hidden Power!"

Minicorn neighed, as her horn glowed yellow, sparks of the same color crackling around it, before firing a straight beam of electricity, which bounced from one orb to another, creating a twisted tower of light. The public was in awe.

"And now, the big finish! Braixen, Fire Blast upwards!"

Braixen nodded, and aiming her wand upwards, she released a massive wall of flames shaped like the kanji of fire. It smashed against the previous combo, making the electrified Hidden Power burst in an explosion of multicolored sparkles.

"And done!" Serena said, as Braixen and Minicorn posed next to each other.

The public broke into a loud applause, with many cheers thrown in between.

"You were awesome, Serena!" Ash shouted.

"Way to go! You have this in the bag!" Bonnie cheered, jumping up and down.

"Heh, not bad. Not bad at all," Natalie said, clapping.

"As usual, Serena never fails to delight the audience!" Jillian said with her usual gusto. "But did she delight the judges? Let's find out!"

Rosalind and Nurse Joy praised Serena for her spectacular use of visual moves, while Ambrose said how the constant flashes and fire

left him nearly blind, though Serena did a good job ignoring him. After that, the Kalosian girl left the stage while Jillian introduced the next coordinator.

...

As Serena returned to the waiting room, she walked towards Vitor, the boy already waiting for her in order to share his thoughts on her performance.

"Great job you did out there, Serena," the brown haired boy praised. "It's great to see that the incident at the plant didn't put a dent on your ability as a coordinator."

"Ash was worried over me not being good enough to take a contest so soon, but hey, when you let something as insignificant as a near-death experience put you down, that's a sign you've given up completely, hehe," Serena said, chuckling a little awkwardly.

"You almost talk as if this wasn't the first incident of this kind you had gone through," Vitor pointed out.

"Because... well, it's not," Serena said, rubbing the back of her head in a way that was very Ash-like. "If I told you how our journey through Kalos went..."

"So... is this how all Pokemon journeys go? Or is it just us?" Vitor asked, rubbing his arm a little.

"I can't say if this is true for everybody. Everybody goes through pretty different experiences, some are more dangerous, others not so much," Serena began. "Why are you asking me this? Are you having second thoughts about becoming a trainer?"

"I'm kind of afraid to think if there will be more experiences like this one waiting for me in the future," Vitor began. "This isn't what I had in mind when I set off on a Pokemon journey..."

"No one does," Serena said, her tone becoming a little more sober. "But it is what it is. The world out there is a place full of dangers, and we will inevitably encounter some as we journey through it. We could have stayed cooped up in our little home towns, safe and sound away from any danger, but we didn't want that, did we?"

Vitor averted his gaze, looking a little upset, as if Serena had somehow read his mind. "No, I didn't want that, and neither did my sister."

"But it's not all bad, isn't it?" Serena asked. "Hadn't I left my home, I wouldn't have met all my wonderful friends, both human and Pokemon, nor have lived through so many great experiences that I wouldn't trade for anything in the world."

Vitor's hand went to his belt, and unclipped one of his pokeballs. He looked at it, and smiled fondly, before clipping it back.

"Yeah, you're right... guess this is the price we pay for living a life of adventures?" Vitor asked.

"Less of a price, and more of a risk. But if an adventure was uneventful and everything happened according to what we expect... it wouldn't be much of an adventure, would it?"

"I don't think I can contest that," Vitor replied.

"Exactly! Not to say that we should welcome and embrace dangerous situations but... well, when you set out on a journey, it's foolish not to expect a little danger. Maybe not the kind we have experienced lately, but you get what I mean," Serena said. "And hey, look at us! We're still here, and we're still kicking. And we're far better now than we were at the beginning of our journeys, thanks to all the experiences we have had."

Vitor's name appeared on the screen, meaning that he would be the next one in the appeal round.

"You're right. The current me is way stronger than the me from a few months back. And future me will be even stronger," Vitor said, Serena's words having slowly restored his resolve. "Now I'm going to go out there, and show all the people there how great me and my Pokemon are!"

"Well said! Now go there and leave them with their mouths hanging!"

...

"And here comes our next coordinator! From Moki Town, Vitor!" Jillian announced.

Natalie grew visibly more excited the moment her twin brother walked into the stage, the light of a spotlight shining brightly upon him.

"Come on bro, show them who's boss!" She hollered while clapping loudly.

"Leafeon, Eletruxo, come out and play!" Vitor said, tossing two pokeballs forwards.

The first one opened, revealing Vitor's Grass-type Eeveelution appearing among a beautiful storm of green leaves and pink petal flowers. The second pokeball released a torrent of crystalline water, which coalesced into a Pokemon that Ash had never seen before. It looked like Eletux, only larger, with a white underbelly, with a yellow fin crossing his head that made it look like a blond mohawk, and another fin of the same color crossing its back. Its tail was now longer and ending in a fin, the four yellow bulbs nowhere to be seen.

"Wait, is that... Eletux's evolution?" Ash asked, as he scanned the new Pokemon.

" Eletruxo, the Hippocampus Pokemon, and Eletux's evolution. Water/Electric. They can use the magnetic waves they generate as

radar. This allows them to see even in pitch darkness." The Pokedex explained, confirming Ash's thoughts.

"Whoa! When did Vitor's Eletux evolve?" Bonnie asked, leaning forward.

"Yesterday afternoon, during our sparring match," Natalie explained. "Guess all the fighting Eletux did during our misadventure at the power plant gave it the last push to evolve."

Alright Leafeon, jump onto Eletruxo's back, and Eletruxo, Surf around the stage!" Vitor commanded.

The Verdant Pokemon jumped on top of the Hippocampus' Pokemon back, expertly keeping its balance, while Eletruxo summoned a wave of water that rode on its bare legs, moving in a circle around the arena.

"Now, turn that into a Waterfall!" Vitor ordered.

The water gathered and formed into a pillar that pushed both Pokemon upwards.

"Leafeon, Energy Ball into the air! And Electruxo, coat it in electricity with Shock Wave!" Vitor said. "And Leafeon, after that, get a Solar Blade ready!"

Leafeon opened its mouth, forming a green sphere of energy, before shooting it upwards, while Electruxo's body crackled with electricity, before sending said electricity in the form of lightning bolts towards the Energy Ball, giving it a vibrant yellow electric aura. The electrified green orb continued flying upwards, its ascent becoming slower and slower, until it stopped completely, and fell down.

In the meantime, Leafeon had been able to gather enough solar power and channel it through its tail, now twice as long as thick and glowing with a golden glow. Leafeon used the Solar Blade to destroy

the Energy Ball and Shock Wave combo, producing a series of fireworks and a rain of yellow and green sparkles.

"And Surf again!" Vitor added.

As soon as Leafeon landed on Eletruxo's back, the watery tower created by Waterfall collapsed into a torrent that spilled into every direction, but quickly took the shape of a wave as the water gathered under Eletruxo, who surfed its way back to the floor while carrying its partner on its back. Once they reached the floor, Leafeon jumped off of Eletruxo's back.

"And done!" Vitor cried, while Eletruxo and Leafeon posed together.

The public broke into applause, cheering loudly as they did. Jillian praised Vitor's performance, as did Rosalind and Nurse Joy. Ambrose criticized Vitor's lack of coherence in his performance and lack of coordination between his Pokemon, but both Vitor and the audience promptly ignored him, and the Moki Town boy returned to the waiting area as the next coordinator was introduced.

...

Once the last coordinator finished their performance, the Appeal Round came to an end.

"And thus the Appeal Round comes to a close!" Jillian announced. "Now, let's see which coordinators our esteemed trio of judges believe they deserve the most to move onto the Contest Battles!"

Everybody held their breath as one by one, the faces of the eight finalists appeared on the screen. Vitor scored second, with Serena scoring fourth. Fans of the coordinators who had passed cheered loudly, while fans of those who didn't groaned and grumbled in displeasure.

"Yes! Not only did my brother pass, he almost got first place!" Natalie cheered.

"Serena passed too!" Bonnie said, just as excited.

"Of course. I'm one hundred percent sure Serena will always pass the Appeal Round," Ash added with a nod.

Jillian continued talking. "Now, let's see which opponent our talented coordinators will have to battle against!"

The eight portraits began to shuffle for a few seconds, before they were paired up. Serena was in the first bracket, and Vitor was in the fourth.

"So, Serena and Vitor won't fight unless they get to the final," Ash said. "Just like the other time."

"It's more exciting that way," Natalie said, before looking at Ash. "You aren't worried that neither Serena or my brother can do it, are you?"

"Of course not!"

As Ash hoped and predicted, Serena did reach the finals without much difficulty. This time she decided to use Sylveon and Chioatl. While it was the first time the Green Chick Pokemon took place in a contest battle, she followed Serena's direction without missing a beat, and barely struggled to keep up with a veteran like Sylveon.

Vitor was also using a Pokemon he had never used in a contest before -at least to Ash's knowledge- in the Snopach that he got from a fossil at Professor Cypress' laboratory, in conjunction with his Cometeor, the two Rock-types proving to be a formidable duo.

Ash watched Vitor's fighting style and tactics carefully, hoping that Serena would also be watching him to prepare a counter. It seemed that Vitor's preferred strategy with these two was to have Snopach use Rock-type moves such as Rock Slide, while Cometeor manipulated them with Psychic in order to create devastating combos, which allowed him to claim the second spot in the finals.

Then again, if the previous match was of any indication, Ash was sure Vitor was keeping an ace in the hole exclusively for Serena.

...

"Ladies and gentlemen, the Bealbeach City contest final is about to begin!" Jillian excitedly announced. "On one side, we have Vitor from Moki Town!"

"Come on little brother! One more victory and that ribbon will be yours!" Natalie cheered.

"And on the other side, from Vaniville Town in Kalos, Serena!" Jillian continued.

"Come on Serena! I know you can win this!" Ash shouted as loud as he could.

"Pi, pikapi!" Pikachu cheered as well.

...

"Cometeor, Snopach, come out and play!" Vitor said, tossing his pokeballs forward.

The capture devices opened, one releasing an explosion of gemstones of multiple colors, the other a tornado of ice and snow. The gemstones merged into a single, diamond-shaped, rainbow colored gem, which shattered into a million pieces, revealing Cometeor. Meanwhile, Snopach emerged from the snow twister.

"Sylveon, Chicoatl, go!" Serena said, mimicking her opponent.

Sylveon emerged from the first pokeball among a torrent of pink hearts, while Chicoatl appeared in the middle of a tornado of green leaves and red flower petals.

The Pokemon already out, Jillian started the final contest battle. "Five minutes on the clock! Begin!"

~Serena (Sylveon, Chicaoatl) VS Vitor (Cometeor, Snopach)~

"The first move is ours! Sylveon, Fairy Wind! Chicaoatl, Razor Leaf into it!" Serena called.

"Syl, syl!"

"Chico!"

Sylveon began to flap and wave her feelers, creating a gust of pink, sparkly wind, taking the form of a tornado, before Chicaoatl fired a salvo of razor-sharp leaves at it. The pink tornado swallowed the leaves and added them to its own power. That combination alone managed to shave a little of Vitor's points.

"Not bad, but insufficient! Snopach, crush that combination with Rock Slide!" Vitor ordered.

"Snooooo!" Snopach trumpeted, before raising its head. Several large rocks appeared just above the pink tornado, falling upon it with great force, dispelling it and blowing the leaves away in every direction.

"And Vitor manages to nullify Serena's opening combo!" Jillian commented, as Serena's score dropped below Vitor's.

"And we aren't done yet! Cometeor, grab those rocks with Psychic and toss them towards Sylveon and Chicaoatl!"

"Meteeeee.." Cometeor buzzed, as its only eye began to glow with a pink light, while raising its floating hand.

A pink outline appeared around the rocks on the ground, before they levitated into the air, and rocketed towards Serena's Pokemon.

"Chicaoatl, get behind Sylveon, and Sylveon, Protect!" Serena called.

The Green Chick Pokemon quickly hid behind her more experienced partner, as Sylveon's body glowed with a faint green light, before a

circular barrier was erected in front of her, successfully repelling Vitor's combination, costing the boy a few points, putting him on the same level as Serena's score.

"Snopach, quickly, Icicle Spear!" Vitor commanded, taking advantage of the fact that Protect had a high chance to fail if used in a row.

"Pa, pach!" Snopach trumpeted, as its tusks elongated while glowed with a dim blue light, before firing them like missiles towards Sylveon.

Unfortunately for Vitor, Protect was far from the only defense Sylveon had in her arsenal.

"Sylveon, Double Team!" Serena ordered.

"Syl, sylveon!" Sylveon cried, as two dozens of illusory doubles flooded the battleground.

Snopach's icy projectiles managed to dispel a few of them, but those who remained were numerous enough to cause some confusion on Vitor's Pokemon.

"Now's our chance! Sylveon, Moonblast, and Chicoatl, Energy Ball!" Serena shouted.

One of the Sylveon formed a pink sphere of glowing energy between her feelers, while Chicoatl opened her beak and formed an orb of green power in front of it. Even if this move revealed which one of the Sylveon was the real one, it came too late, as the two spheres shot towards the two Rock-types, the Moonblast slamming against Cometeor and the Energy Ball against Snopach, both Pokemon being knocked backwards and crying in pain by the ensuing blasts.

The double hit managed to deplete quite the amount of Vitor's points, as his score dropped below three fourths, while Serena's was still above it. At that moment, Sylveon's duplicates vanished.

"So far, Serena has been dictating the pace of the battle, fending off Vitor's attacks while dishing out moves as powerful as they're beautiful!" Jillian commented. "Will Vitor be able to turn the tables?"

"You bet I will! Snopach, use Rollout! Aim for Sylveon!" Vitor said, thrusting an open hand forward. "Cometeor, get ready!"

"Soooo!" Snopach trumpeted, as the Tiny Tusk Pokemon coiled into a sphere, before spinning towards the Intertwining Pokemon, leaving a trail of dust in its wake.

"Sylveon, Shadow Ball at Snopach! We must stop that Rollout from building momentum!" Serena ordered.

"Syyyyyyyl... !" Sylveon cried as she formed a sphere of pure darkness in front of her mouth, before firing it at the coming sphere of rock and ice that was Snopach.

"Cometeor, now! Use Psychic to help Snopach maneuver!"

"What?" Serena asked.

"Comeeeeeee... !" Cometeor buzzed as its one eye glowed pink.

A pink outline appeared around Snopach, and was quickly pushed sideways, avoiding the Ghost-type move, before it was quickly pushed back onto its original course. Sylveon didn't have time to react and was slammed by the spinning Pokemon, knocking her backwards.

"Sylveon!" Serena cried.

"Now, Snopach, aim for Chicoatl!" Vitor said.

"Chicoatl, use Razor Leaf, quickly!" Serena ordered, hoping an attack with a wider area of effect could be harder to avoid.

"You know what to do, Cometeor!" Vitor said.

As Chicoatl fired a barrage of sharp leaves, Snopach glowed pink again, though rather than moving to the sides, it was lifted into the air, the salvo of leaves sailing harmlessly below him, before it hit the ground once again without losing a single iota of momentum, before it slammed against Chicoatl, just like it did with Sylveon.

Serena's score dropped, once again lagging below Vitor's.

"Rollout again on Chicoatl, before it can recover!" Vitor ordered once more.

Snopach's spinning was even faster, as evidenced not only by its superior speed, but by the size of the clouds of dust it left behind.

"Chicoatl, use Giga Drain!" Serena ordered.

As Snopach approached, Chicoatl got back on her feet, her beak and tiny claws glowing a vibrant green. Maybe she couldn't stop Chicoatl from taking damage, but maybe she could have her Pokemon recover some health.

"Whoops! Cometeor, pull Snopach back!" Vitor called.

Just as Snopach's Rollout and Chicoatl's Giga Drain were about to clash, a pink outline appeared again around Snopach, and the rolling Pokemon was lifted into the air and pulled back, causing the Green Chick Pokemon's attack to miss and for Serena's points to drop even further, now being less than half.

"And Vitor pulls ahead in the match thanks to a great strategy and his Pokemon's teamwork!" Jillian praised with her usual flair. "What can Serena do to overcome this hurdle?"

"That's quite the nifty combination you got there," Serena complimented her rival.

"Do you like it? I call it the Invisible Yo-yo. By combining Psychic with Rollout, Cometeor can use Snopach as a living battery ram to hit

your Pokemon from afar," Vitor explained, clearly proud of his tactic. "And in case Snopach is in danger, I can have Cometeor reel it back."

...

"Vitor's really good at coming up with these kinds of combinations," Natalie said, sounding just as proud of her brother as he was of himself. "At first I was a little disappointed that he wasn't going to be a trainer like me but... seeing this, it's obvious that contests are where Vitor's talents shine the brightest."

"Well, Serena is also pretty good," Bonnie said, somewhat defensively. "She might have less points, but this battle is far from over."

Natalie, however, shook her head. "Serena beats my brother in experience, but that can only take her so far. Once my brother finally figured out how contests go, it was only a matter of time that he would surpass her."

"I'm with Bonnie. Don't you think it's a little too soon to decide that this match is over?" Ash questioned.

"In that case, Serena better think up something fast," Natalie said. "Or else this battle will end the same way as Rochfale."

...

"Alright Snopach, Rollout one more time, and victory shall be ours! Aim for Chicoatl" Vitor cheered. "Cometeor, stay ready!"

Snopach once again rolled towards the Green Chick Pokemon, spinning even faster than before. Serena knew that Vitor wasn't just boasting; with all the damage her Pokemon had taken, and all the momentum Rollout had built, another hit from that would be the end.

" But what can I do? That Snopach is rolling so fast, and Vitor can just pull it away the moment it is in... hey wait a minute, maybe I can use Snopach's speed against it!" Serena thought, as an idea dawned upon her. "Sylveon, shield Chicaoatl with Protect, quickly!"

"Cometeor, pull Snopach back with Psychic!" Vitor ordered.

Cometeor's eye began to glow pink as an outline of the same color appeared around Snopach's rolling form once again. But unfortunately, it wasn't fast enough to pull the Tiny Tusk Pokemon back in time, and slammed against Sylveon's green colored barrier, losing all its momentum. The fossil Pokemon unfurled its body and shook its head a little dizzy, before it began to float away.

"Sylveon, don't let it away! Grab it with your feelers!" Serena called, drawing a few gasps.

"What!?"

Sylveon steeled herself, and her four feelers shot towards the Tiny Tusk Pokemon, wrapping themselves around its limbs and body, stopping Cometeor from pulling its partner away.

"Now Chicaoatl, use Giga Drain!" Serena ordered.

"Chico!" Chicaoatl cried, her claws and beak glowing green, as she leaped towards the bound Snopach and sunk her glowing parts into it. Green energy orbs began to flow from Snopach's body into Chicaoatl's, restoring some of her health at expense of Snopach's.

"And Serena makes some neat use of Sylveon's feelers to trap Vitor's Snopach!" Jillian commented, as Vitor's points dropped, close to the halfway mark.

"Snopach, Rock Slide!" Vitor ordered.

Fighting off the pain of the Giga Drain sucking its energy off, Snopach was able to summon a multitude of rocks above Sylveon

and Chicoatl. Without Serena having to tell them to dodge, the two Pokemon released Snopach, which was carried back by Cometeor's psychic, and jumped away in order to avoid being buried by the falling boulders.

As Snopach was reeled in, Serena could see how Vitor's previous confidence was beginning to crumble. It was obvious he was banking on the Invisible Yo-yo to win this match, and seeing it stopped had given him pause.

"You're really good at coming up with complex strategies and combinations, Vitor, probably better than me. But thanks to Ash, I'm much better at coming up with tactics on the spot and counters for enemy moves! Now time to capitalize on this before he has time to recover!" Serena thought. "That's not the only way Sylveon's feelers can be used! Chicoatl, jump on Sylveon's feelers and use them as a spring! Then, rapid fire Energy Ball!"

Chicoatl hopped on top of Sylveon who caught her partner with her feelers, before launching the Green Chick Pokemon into the air. Chicoatl shifted mid-air in order to face her foes, opened her beak, and began firing Energy Balls non-stop at the two Rock-type Pokemon below.

"Cometeor, counter them with Power Gem! And Snopach, Icicle Spear on Chicoatl!" Vitor ordered.

"Oh no you won't! Sylveon, Moonblast on Snopach! Don't let it attack!" Serena ordered.

The amethyst crystals on Cometeor's back began to glow with a light of the same color, before firing a barrage of bright pink beams at the incoming Energy Balls, while Snopach's tusks doubled in size and were coated in a light blue glow. However, before the fossil could fire the attack, Sylveon formed a sphere of pink light between her feelers and launched it at the Tiny Tusk Pokemon. The attack connected, producing a big explosion that knocked Snopach back and interrupted the attack.

Vitor's points dropped, his score now lower than Serena's.

"It seems that Serena was able to overcome Vitor's tactic with teamwork of her own, and counterattack with a relentless offensive! Can Vitor recover his previous advantage?" Jillian commented, and looked at the scoreboard. "In that case, he better do it fast, since only a minute remains!"

"That's more than enough time! The Invisible Yo-Yo wasn't the only combination I had planned! Snopach, Ancient Power! Keep it around you!" Vitor ordered.

"Snoooo... !"

Several glowing dots of golden light appeared above it in a circle, spinning. The dots of light grew into golden rocks, and their spinning radius expanded so they surrounded both of Vitor's Pokemon.

"Keep it up! Now, move forward!" Vitor ordered, as his two Pokemon began to slowly move towards Serena's.

"What the...? Sylveon, Shadow Ball! Chicaoatl, Razor Leaf!" Serena ordered.

Sylveon fired an orb of dark power, while Chicaoatl launched a salvo of leaf-shaped blades at the duo of Rock-types. The spinning rocks of the ancient power, however, managed to deflect both attacks, their advance unimpeded.

"Good! Now Cometeor, Stone Edge!" Vitor ordered.

From within the safety of the circle of spinning rocks, Cometeor slammed its lone fist into the ground, erecting a row of rising pillars towards Sylveon and Chicaoatl, that were forced to jump away.

"Vitor is no slouch as coming with tactics on the fly. That Ancient Power makes for a formidable makeshift barrier. However, it was a

glaring weak point," Serena thought. "Sylveon, use your feelers to launch Chicoatl into the air! Chicoatl, Razor Leaf!"

Once again, Chicoatl hopped onto Sylveon, who used her feelers to catapult Chicoatl above the battleground, and prepared to rain a barrage of razor-sharp leaf on its foes.

"Not this time! Cometeor, catch her with Psychic!" Vitor ordered.

"Cooooo... !" Cometeor buzzed, its eye glowing as it aimed its only hand at Chicoatl.

Chicoatl's body glowed with a pink light, and frozen mid air, her attack canceled. The Green Chick Pokemon kicked the air in a vain attempt to break free of the Bolide Pokemon's hold, but to no avail. Serena's points dropped, now at the same level as Vitor's.

"Good! Keep her there, and wait for my mark!" Vitor said.

...

"That's it. Vitor has won," Natalie declared.

"Why are you so sure? His score is the same as Serena," Ash pointed out.

But Natalie didn't elaborate.

...

" Oh no, this is bad! Chicoatl can't attack if she's under Psychic, and Sylveon doesn't have any attack powerful enough to break that barrier... Maybe Swift could get past it, but I doubt it makes much of a dent on a pair of Rock-types. If only... hey, wait a minute! There is an attack that can bypass that barrier and Chicoatl can use it while immobilized!" Serena grinned as an idea dawned upon her.

"Chicoatl, Grass Whistle! Sing as loud as you can!"

Chicoatl didn't waste any time, and began to sing her favorite melody. Green musical notes began to float around Cometeor and Snopach. The two Pokemon began to feel drowsy.

"No! Don't let that song affect you! Stay awake!" Vitor pleaded.

But his pleas fell on deaf ears. As the song lulled the two Rock-type Pokemon to sleep, both the Psychic and the Ancient Power ceased, Chicoatl falling to the ground, and the spinning golden rocks disappearing into golden dust.

"Now's our chance! Sylveon, Moonblast! Chicoatl, Energy Ball!" Serena called.

Once again, Sylveon and Chicoatl fired twin orbs of energy, one pink and white, the other yellow and golden. The two spheres of energy merged together into a larger sphere of swirling pink, white, yellow and green, as it advanced unimpeded towards the asleep Pokemon.

"Cometeor, Snopach! Wake up, please!" Vitor shouted.

But they didn't wake up, and the combination attack connected, resulting in a massive explosion of pink, green and yellow lights. When the ensuing cloud of dust dispelled, Cometeor and Snopach were lying motionless, their bodies sprawled on the recently formed crater.

BZZZZZZZZZ!

"Vitor's Pokemon can't fight any longer! That means the winner of the match, and thus the winner of the contest, is Serena!" Jillian announced.

...

"No... way..." Natalie said, almost in shock, watching with wide eyes as the scoreboard changed to show Serena's portrait, above a

picture of Sylveon and Chicaoatl, with the word "WINNER" written beneath them.

"What were you saying about Vitor already winning?" Bonnie asked, her tone extremely smug.

"Nenene!" Dedenne said, imitating Bonnie's voice.

"But I thought... that with that Psychic..." Natalie stammered.

"And you thought that Serena was just going to accept defeat like that? No one knows how a match will end until it's officially over," Ash began. "That's why you never give up until it's over."

...

"Yes! We did it!" Serena cried, as she knelt besides her Pokemon, giving them a hug. Sylveon hugged her and Chicaoatl with her feelers. "You were awesome out there."

There was a crackling noise, and Chicaoatl began to glow. Startled, both Serena and Sylveon broke the hug and took a step back, watching in awe how Chicaoatl began to change and grow, changing her four legged form for a more serpentine one.

"Que!" The new Pokemon cried once the evolution was finished.

The Pokemon in front of her was a large green snake covered in green feathers with a yellow underbelly. She had two arms ending in three long yellow claws, covered in bright red feathers. She still kept Chicaoatl's bird-like head with a yellow beak, but now she had long red feathers over her eyes, and a red feather with a yellow spot in the middle of her forehead. Her tail ended in a fan of red feathers as well.

"Chicaoatl, you... you evolved!" Serena exclaimed, as she pulled out her Pokedex to check her new Pokemon.

" Quetzoral, the Canopy Pokemon, and Chicoatl's evolution. Grass/Flying. Quetzoral often wrap themselves around long branches of trees and fall asleep. They dine on nectar from flowers," the Pokedex explained.

"Hey there," Vitor's voice startled Serena a bit, given how focused she had been on her Pokemon. "I was going to congratulate you for winning the contest. Guess I should also congratulate you on your Chicoatl evolvin."

Serena smiled earnestly, as she extended her hand. "Thank you. You and your Pokemon fought really well, Vitor. You're getting better and better at coming up with combinations and tactics for contests."

"Guess not good enough, given that I lost to you," Vitor said, accepting Serena's handshake, looking a little embarrassed. "After my last victory over you, I thought I had surpassed you. But it seems I got a little carried away and slacked on my training."

"I'm pretty sure you did your best. Sometimes you win, and other times you lose," Serena said, shrugging a little. "The important part is to keep going forward no matter what. Who knows? Maybe the next time we meet in a contest, you'll be the one walking out with the ribbon. It has happened before."

With that, Vitor nodded and left the stage. A few minutes later, Serena and her two Pokemon were standing on a small podium, the three judges and Jillian next to her.

"Congratulations, Serena," Nurse Joy said, as she handed her the case with the Bealbeach Ribbon on it. "With this Ribbon, you're another step closer to qualify for the Grand Festival. I'm sure we will see you there."

"Thank you. And I can assure you I will be there," Serena said, taking her third ribbon, before breaking into a grin and raising it above her head. "Ta-da! I just won the Bealbeach Ribbon!"

"Syl!"

"Quetz!"

"And thus, the Bealbeach City Contest comes to an end! I hope you have a great time, and see you next time!" Jillian said, officially ending the contest.

...

When the contest ended, it was already evening. Ash said that he was hungry, and suggested having dinner at some restaurant instead of the Pokemon Center in order to celebrate Serena's victory. Needless to say, Vitor and Natalie weren't in the mood for celebrations, so they decided to head back to the Center, have some light dinner, and go bed early, since Natalie was planning on challenging Cali the next day.

After bidding the twins goodbye, Serena checked her tablet, and found a restaurant not too pricey that had great remarks and was close to the beach.

As they walked through the streets of the bustling city, Serena's Pokegear started to ring. Seeing the caller's ID, the honey blonde smiled, and accepted the call.

"Hey there, Clemont!" Serena greeted her friend, as she saw the bespectacled blonde on the screen, Lilia next to him.

"Clemont?" Ash asked, as he looked at Serena's Pokegear.

"Hey there, big bro!" Bonnie greeted her brother.

"Hello there! Congratulations on your victory, Serena!" Clemont said, smiling widely. "We saw your contest on TV. You were great!"

"I wish we were there to cheer you on in person," Lilia added.

"Thanks a lot!" Serena replied, beaming. "With this ribbon, I'm more than halfway through. Two more, and I'll secure a spot in the Grand Festival!"

"That's something we definitely aren't going to miss," Lilia assured. "By that time, I believe we'll have a lot of work on the plant already done, so we'll be able to afford to be there."

"That's great to hear. It wouldn't be the same if you guys weren't there," Serena said.

"Now that you won your ribbon, and Ash has his badge, I imagine you won't stay in Bealbeach for much longer. Do you know where you, Ash and Bonnie are going next?" Clemont asked.

"Truth be told, we haven't thought about that yet. Given what happened, we decided to take a couple days to relax and unwind here. Maybe," she briefly looked at Ash, her cheeks turning a little pink. "Going to the beach together. Bealbeach has such nice beaches, yet we've only been there to train."

"Yeah. After what we went through in the old power plant, we could use some time to recover," Ash agreed.

"Pi, pika," Pikachu said, nodding.

"You guys made me so jealous. Wish Clemont and I could go and have some fun as well. But alas, we still have plenty of work here," Lilia lamented.

Bonnie snorted. " *Work* . Yeah. Sure."

"Anyway, I better hang up. They're about to serve dinner here, and we don't want to be late," Clemont said. "I'll make sure to call you when we see you win your last two ribbons!"

"I'll be looking forward to that. Goodbye!" she said.

The screen briefly turned black, before it displayed the main menu. Serena then closed her Pokegear, and she, Ash and Bonnie continued their way towards the beach restaurant.

...

Nuclear Plant Epsilon

After finishing the call, Clemont and Lilia continued their trip from the power plant towards the Rest House, with her Buneary trailing behind them. The Rest House was a building erected in order to act as provisional living quarters for the workers who didn't live in Bealbeach or those who preferred to stay on the island instead of coming and going. It had many bedrooms, each with their own bathroom, living rooms, and one large cafeteria that served food three times a day.

There was a dirt road formed from all the vehicles coming and going from the port to the plant and vice versa, though Clemont hoped that they could build a proper road over it so the crossing would be easier.

"You know, dinner used to be Chespin's favorite time of the day," Clemont began. "Now it's both Chespin's *and* Geigeroach's."

Lilia giggled. "You have a thing to attract gluttonous Pokemon, don't you?"

"Maybe it's a curse for knowing my way around a kitchen?" Clemont asked.

"A curse? I thought you didn't believe in curses," Lilia said in a teasing tone.

"Sometimes I do," Clemont said, sounding weary but still good natured.

"Still, it would be better if people here don't know how well you cook," Lilia said. "Or else they might want you to work in the cafeteria as well, haha!"

"If that's the case, I think I might have to take another go at the cloning machine," Clemont sighed.

Lilia raised a curious eyebrow. "Cloning machine? Really?"

"Sometimes I have so many things to do, that I feel just one of me it's not enough. That's why I created Clembot to begin with. Though there are things that a robot can't-uh?"

Clemont saw a flash of vibrant green through the corner of his eye. He turned around, and saw nothing, but heard the sound of something rustling through the nearby bushes.

"Clemont? Are you okay?" Lilia asked.

"Bun?" Buneary asked as well, looking at the spot Clemont was looking at.

"I saw something scurrying through the bushes there. I think it might be a Nuclear Pokemon," Clemont said, a bit worried.

"I find that highly unlikely. Nuclear Pokemon never leave the area around the old power plant," Lilia said. "And now that Team Omega left, I'm sure all of them returned there."

"If you say so..." Clemont said, though his voice denoted that he wasn't fully convinced.

The two continued their trip towards the Rest House, resuming their chat. Though, for the rest of the night, Clemont couldn't help but wonder if he had seen a Nuclear Pokemon wandering so far away from the old plant.

Author's Note: And thus, Serena wins her third ribbon, as well as her rematch against Vitor, proving that the boy from Moki hadn't surpassed her just yet.

And not only did Serena win her third ribbon, but one of her Pokemon has evolved! Though, now that I think about it, Quetzoral is the first of Serena's Pokemon that has evolved, has it? Kind of weird, given that she's the last one to join Serena. I can't believe it took me so many chapters for that. Oh well, rest assured that Quetzoral will be far from the last of Serena's Pokemon to evolve.

This was the first chapter without Clemont on it, and gotta say it felt a little weird. As if something was missing. Oh well, at least he wasn't completely absent, given that I managed to include him at the end to congratulate Serena for a hard earned win. Also, it seems that there's something up with the Nuclear Pokemon on the island, but eh, I'm sure it's nothing :D

Next time, our heroes enjoy a relaxing time at the beach, and absolutely nothing bad will happen! :D

Thanks to 61394, Fox McCloud, hirowriter, MegaSalamence64 and Viroro-kun for reviewing last chapter, and special thanks to Viroro-kun for his great job beta-reading this chapter.

See you next chapter, and don't forget to leave a review :)

The Blinding Flash

Chapter 27:

The Blinding Flash

Bealbeach City

The morning after the contest, Ash, Serena, Bonnie and the twins headed towards the Bealbeach City Gym once again, this time for Natalie's match.

Just like with Ash, it was a doubles match with each trainer using four Pokemon. Though, given Natalie being a much less experienced trainer, Cali used a different team, one that didn't include her terrifying Mega Gyarados: A Corsola, a Tubjaw, a Cararalm (Serena couldn't tell if it was the same Cararalm she had used against Ash) and a fish Pokemon with a white small body, thick red lips, and a massive exposed brain for a head.

" Brailip, the Coral Brain Pokemon. Water/Psychic. This Pokémon is known for its intelligence. It can't swim fast, but it hides among coral reefs, using its psychic powers to detect others," the Pokedex revealed upon scanning the new Pokemon.

Natalie had used Slothohm, Minyan, Sableau and Dearewl. After a fierce battle, her team managed to beat Cali's, and she exited the Gym with one more badge inside her case. After that, the twins decided they had nothing else to do in Bealbeach City, and took a ferry that would take them back to Comet Port, and from there, they would take different paths according to what they would decide to do next.

Meanwhile, Ash, Serena and Bonnie were planning to stay at Bealbeach at least a couple more days to rest a little.

They decided to go to the beach after lunch. In the meantime, Ash decided to do some light training with his Pokemon, with Bonnie staying with him and helping him in any way she could. Serena, meanwhile, decided to return to the department store.

Today was the day where the tickets would be raffled, and Serena had the feeling that luck was going to be on her side. When she entered the store's lobby, having arrived ten minutes before noon, she ran into a large group of people gathered around a platform. Said platform had a rather large slot machine-like counter, with the same saleswomen that had been selling the tickets there. And once it was twelve o'clock, one of the saleswomen pulled out a mic, tapping it with her finger before she began to speak.

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to the raffle of two tickets for the prestigious and exclusive Tandor Luxury Cruise!" the saleswoman said. "We may have sold a lot of tickets, but unfortunately, there can only be one winner. Now, without further ado, let's go! Make sure you have your tickets at hand!"

Serena had hers in her hand, with the number 2425 on it.

Another saleswoman -this time, the one she sold Serena her ticket- pulled a large lever on the slot machine-like contraption, and the four slots began to rapidly spin. One of them finally stopped.

"Our first number is 2!" the host announced.

The announcement was met by a chorus of groans from people who were already out of the raffle, while several others grew more excited. Then, the second slot came to a halt.

"The second number is 4!"

Again, more groans, and people grumpily walking away, some even tearing their tickets to pieces. Serena, though, could feel her heart beating faster and faster. Then, the third slot stopped.

"The third number is 2 again!"

This time, Serena couldn't help but let out a squeal of joy. It was happening, it was really happening! Oh, she could already envision herself having an unforgettable time with Ash on that magnificent ship, having romantic dinners, taking a bath together on a jacuzzi, watching the sunset from the ship's deck while the two of them shared a kiss...

"And the last number is..." the host began, as the slot began to slow its spin, as opposed to the other three, which stopped all of sudden.

Serena could almost see it.

"Five," she confidently said.

"... eight!"

"... what?"

Serena felt like she had been splashed with a bucket of ice cold water. Did she get the last number wrong, after getting the first three right? Yeah, it clearly had to be that.

"OH MY GOODNESS! IT'S ME! THAT'S MY NUMBER!" a voice that definitely wasn't Serena's shouted in joy.

"And we have a winner! Get over here to claim your prize!" the host said.

Serena then saw a girl her age, perhaps a year or two younger, climb the short stairs towards the platform. She had light brown skin, green eyes, dark brown hair styled in a mass of dreadlocks that cascaded down her back, was wearing a green sleeveless top with yellow trims, light pink knee-length pants, and brown sandals. Serena also noticed a weird white bracelet on her right wrist that didn't look like a jewel. She was also a trainer, if the pokeballs attached to her belt were anything to go by.

"Congratulations for winning, young lady!" the host said, handing the girl the pair of tickets. "May I know your name?"

"Sure thing! My name's Leona!" the girl, Leona, cheerfully introduced herself. The host then motioned to her to keep talking about herself a little more. "Oh! I'm from Heahea City in Alola! And I came to Tandor in order to compete in its Contest Circuit, given that we don't have contests back at home, and I'd love nothing more than becoming a Top Coordinator!"

Coordinator? Serena didn't remember seeing that girl in any of the contests she had taken part of. Then again, it's possible that the two of them simply never took part in the same contest at once.

"Well, you're in luck, since as I'm sure my colleagues told you, a contest will be hosted on the ship. And said contest will have a special guest to act as an honorary judge!" the host said.

"I know! That's why I decided to take part in this raffle! Heh, it seems that even far away from home, the Tapus cast fortune over me!" Leona said.

The reminder of the special contest did nothing but rub salt on the wound. Sighing in disappointment, Serena walked to a nearby trashcan and tossed her losing ticket inside it. As she left the department store, she hoped that a nice day at the beach would help her forget about losing those two tickets.

Oh well, on the bright side, she didn't have to worry about what she could do to get a third ticket for Bonnie.

...

After having lunch, the group headed to the beach. Thankfully, the weather was on their side as the sun shone brightly in the sky, not a single cloud to obstruct it. The beach was crowded, but not enough to fight for a good spot. After placing their towels on the sand, both Ash and Serena grabbed all their pokeballs.

"Come out, everybody!" Ash said, as she and Serena tossed their pokeballs in the air, opening and releasing their Pokemon one by one. "Alright guys, no training today! Today, we only have fun! So go and do whatever you please!" Though upon seeing Dunsparce's evil grin and eyes glinting with malicious intent, Ash frowned and added: "You know what I mean, Dunsparce. I mean harmless fun, not causing any trouble."

"Parce..." Dunsparce groaned, rolling his eyes, and ignored the glare Pika, Aveden and Selkid were shooting in his direction, before he buried himself underground.

After that, the Pokemon dispersed, some to rest, others to play either in the sand or in the water. Bonnie quickly shed her usual clothing, revealing her Slowbro-themed swimsuit underneath, and rushed to join them in the fun, a beach ball under her arm and Dedenne scurrying behind her.

"Pika!" Pikachu cried, going after her as well.

"Don't strain yourself much, Pikachu!" Ash warned the electric mouse, his voice sounding a little more stern than usual, worried for his beloved starter still present within him. "Remember what Nurse Joy said!"

"Piiiiika... !" Pikachu replied, rolling his eyes, before joining Bonnie and some of their Pokemon.

Bonnie quickly gathered many of their Pokemon in order for all of them to play with her beach ball. Aside from Pikachu and Dedenne, there were Orchynx, Frosulo, Pancham, Sylveon and Minicorn. Greninja and Braixen didn't join the fun, taking the role of guardians of both Bonnie and the rest of their teammates, watching from a distance to make sure nothing dangerous would befall them.

They could hear snores coming from a lump of sand that had formed when Dunsparce buried himself underground. It seemed the Land Snake Pokemon didn't want to socialize much, and opted to take a

nap under the sand. Oh well, at least he wouldn't be causing any problems.

Aveden and Quetzoral were soaring above them, the latter following the former. Evolution had granted the Canopy Pokemon the ability to fly with her new Flying-type, but just because she could fly now didn't mean that she could fly *well*, and she needed the Bliss Bird Pokemon to give her some help, advice and pointers.

Aveden spending time with Quetzoral would have made Selkid a little grumpy -Serena was still trying to discern how the Sea Nymph Pokemon felt towards Ash's bird; if she really like Aveden or not- but she paid them no mind, as she was swimming in the water, squealing in joy as if she was having the best time of her life.

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"Heh, look at her go," Ash said, as he began to undress as well, until the only article of clothing covering his body were a pair of dark blue swimming trunks that he was wearing instead of his usual underwear. "She's really having a great time, isn't she?"

Serena, also undressing, replied: "Well, Selkid lived in the sea. Even if she's now with me, I guess she can't help but feel joy whenever she's close to the ocean."

"It's nice to see -whoa!" Ash suddenly said.

"Whoa?" Serena repeated, having just finished undressing, looking at Ash with a curious glance as to find what elicited such a reaction from the boy.

The honey blonde looked a little self-conscious upon realizing that Ash was looking at *her*, her body clad only in a dark blue bikini with

pink flower patterns and... was that a blush she could see on his face?

"*Come on, you got a reaction out of him! Don't go and waste it, you dumbass!*" a tiny voice in her head said, a voice that for some reason, sounded a lot like Miette's.

"Um..." Serena stammered, looked a bit lost for words, before saying. "Uh, I bought this bikini a few days ago at the Bealbeach Department Store. They had such a wide array of swimwear! Hehe..." she chuckled awkwardly, her cheeks burning red, then, trying her best not to combust, she made a slight pose. "Um, do you like it?"

"Y-Yeah... !" Ash said. He swallowed, before smiling a little and adding: "It looks really good on you!"

"Thank you," Serena said, a whirlwind of emotions raging inside her of the thought of Ash finally showing some interest in her. She then sat on her towel, and averted Ash's gaze.

Ash sat on his towel as well, and panted. "It's just me, or it's really hot in here?" he asked, as he fanned his face with his hand. Serena really wanted to wish that Ash's sudden feeling of heat was because of her and not the sun, but she didn't want to get her hopes too high. "Man, the heat sure is stifling, isn't it?"

"Do you want to go for an ice cream?" Serena suggested.

"Eh, nah, I'm not hungry. We just ate, after all," Ash said.

"Well... how about we join Selkid in the water?" Serena offered. "Maybe the sun will be more bearable after getting a little soaked."

"That's a great idea. Let's go!" Ash said, as he dashed for the water.

Serena followed him at a more relaxed pace. As he headed towards the water, she saw that their Pokemon had attracted a group of

children towards them, all of whom Bonnie had invited to play. They looked at their Pokemon with awe and even some reverence, probably because most of them couldn't be found in the region and thus felt exotic to the locals.

"Wohoooo!" Ash hollered, as he dived into the water, disappearing under the surface for a couple seconds, before bursting through the water with a loud splash. "Ah, so much better! Come on Serena, the water's great!"

"I'm coming!" she said, but her actions didn't match the enthusiasm of her voice.

The moment her feet touched the water, she was startled by how cold the water felt, which caused her to enter the water a bit too slowly. After a minute, she was barely knee-depth into the water. And Ash was starting to get impatient.

"Come on Serena, are you getting into the water or not?" he asked, hands on his hips.

"Just give me a second!" Serena replied, as she continued to walk slowly towards him. A small wave splashed against her bare belly, causing her to yelp.

"It'll be night time by the time you get into the water," Ash said.

"Ash, the water is too cold! Just give me some time to get my body used to it!" Serena protested.

"This is like ripping a band-aid! It's best to just do it quickly!" Ash said. "Just jump into the water! It will be better that way!"

"Ash, I'm not going to do that," Serena insisted. "Just let me get used to the water at my pace, okay? There's no hurry!"

"I know, but the fact that you're taking soooooo long to get in the water is driving me nuts..." Ash complained, before he looked at her

again. The grin his mouth curved into sent the honey blonde chills.
"Perhaps you need..."

"... Ash, what are you doing?" Serena asked, stopping in her tracks.

"... a little *push*," Ash said, his grin turning feral, as he waddled towards Serena like a predator stalking his prey.

"Ash, don't you dare!" Serena warned as her voice increased an octave. She tried to back off from the approaching boy, but he was approaching faster. "Ash, no!"

"Ash, yes!"

"Ash, no!" she repeated, as she began to send splashes of water along his way, but to little effect.

"Water-type moves have no effect on me, haha!" Ash said, finally reaching Serena and grabbing her by the wrists. "Come on Serena, embrace the sea!"

"Let me go!" Serena protested, struggling against Ash, however, she was unable to fight off the boy's superior's strength. "Come on Ash, the water is really cold!"

"Come on Serena, stop fooling around! The water is calling for you!" Ash said, as he continued to pull her towards him.

"Tell the water I'm not home and-IAAAAAHHH!"

While she tried to pull back, she lost her footing and fell on her back against the water, as her wrists slipped from Ash's grip. She emerged back, shivering.

"Are you okay, Serena?" Ash asked, now sounding a bit concerned.

"Cold! It's so... cold!" Serena said, her whole body shivering, the sunlight doing very little to counter such sensation.

"Don't worry, you'll get used to it in no time," Ash reassured. "Get back into the water, and you'll see how-"

But Ash was unable to finish what he was saying, as Serena pushed him with both hands, making him fall on his back as well. He resurfaced with another grin plastered in his face.

"Oh, so you want a battle uh? Then feel the might of my Aqua Jet!" Ash shouted, as he barreled towards Serena.

However, before Ash could reach her, Serena moved aside, and pushed him forward, using his own momentum against him, making him fall face first into the water. Only Ash's head poked from the surface, spitting some seawater, and looked at Serena with a confused look.

Serena placed both hands on her hips. "You aren't catching me a second time, Ash!" Serena laughed.

The two of them continued playing in the water, chasing one another, pushing each other into the water, all while they laughed and had a great time. Eventually, Ash got a hold of Serena once again, who struggled to break free, as she kept laughing.

That is, until she saw something that made her stop laughing.

"Ash, wait!" Serena cried. "Look behind you!"

"Like I'm going to fall for such an old trick!" Ash replied.

"No, I'm serious, look behind you!" Serena insisted.

Ash then felt the way water shifted around him, followed by a shadow being cast above him and Serena. Looking back, he realized that he should have listened to the honey blonde when he saw a large wave about to crash on top of them. They barely had time to scream before the wave fell upon them, and sent them rolling back towards the shore.

When the water receded, Ash found himself with his back against the sand, and Serena on top of him, their faces really close to each other.

For a moment, they didn't say anything, the two of them just staring into each other's eyes, before they began to blush.

"Uh... Serena?" Ash asked.

But Serena didn't hear him. There was something about that moment, with her on top of him, their bodies soaked in seawater that made their skin glisten under the sun, their faces so close to each other... in another time, Serena would have jumped back as if Ash was made of fire. But now... a primal feeling resting deep inside her had finally awakened. She closed her eyes, pursed her lips, and moved her face closer to Ash's...

BEEEEEP! BEEEEEP!

... before the loud beeping of Ash's pokegear ringing snapped her out of her trance. Grumbling, she moved herself from on top of Ash's body so he could answer the call, sitting besides him.

"Uh, it's Clemont," Ash said, looking at the Caller ID.

"Great timing, Clemont," Serena grumbled, low enough so Ash couldn't hear her, as she crossed her arms over her knees. "This better be important..."

Ash accepted the call, the screen displaying Clemont's face. "Hey there, Clemont! What's up?"

"Ash! It's... it's... something terrible just happened!" Clemont said, his voice sounding very agitated.

Serena's anger instantly evaporated, replaced by growing concern. Perhaps it was an important call after all.

"Clemont? What's going on? What happened?" Ash asked, clearly sharing her concern as well.

"An horde of Nuclear Pokemon appeared out of nowhere and attacked the power plant!" Clemont said. "We tried to fight back, but there were too many!"

"What!?" Ash asked in shock. The memory of their encounter with the Nuclear Pokemon on the island was as fresh in Ash's mind as it was in hers. "Clemont, where are you now? Are you okay?"

"Yes, for the time being. I'm on Lilia's boat, with her, Cameron, and some of the workers, sailing towards bealbeach," Clemont explained. "We were able to evacuate everybody before-"

Then, the call abruptly ended, the words "CONNECTION LOST" displayed against an electric green background.

"Clemont? Clemont!"

Then, there was a blinding flash, followed by a thundering boom, as a mushroom cloud formed into the distance.

As a deafening silence spread over the beach, everybody, human and Pokemon alike, stopped what they were doing to look at the explosion in the horizon.

The same tragedy from a decade in the past had struck Tador once again. What the onlookers didn't know is that it would be much worse this time around.

...

Needless to say, people quickly evacuated the beach and returned to the city. Ash, Serena and Bonnie headed towards the docks, hoping to see Lilia's yacht. Thankfully, they didn't have to wait much, and the familiar vessel, followed by other ships, docked on the port, and people began to pour from it, most of them wearing either the

typical lab coat of a scientist or the dirty overalls of a worker. Clemont, Lilia and Cameron were among the last to leave the yacht.

The moment Clemont put a foot on the dock, Bonnie tackled him into a hug, crying over how worried she was that something might have happened to him, with Clemont reassuring her that he was okay.

"It was thanks to Cameron that all of us escaped relatively unharmed," Clemont explained. "He and his Pokemon kept the Nuclear Pokemon at bay, buying the rest of us enough time to evacuate the personnel."

"Wish I could have done more. My Pokemon are strong, but even they have their limits, and those radioactive pests hit hard," Cameron lamented, as his hand went to his belt, where his pokeball were clipped. "They'll need to stay some time at a Pokemon Center after the beating they got."

"So, what happened? You said that a horde of Nuclear Pokemon attacked all of sudden, before the call was suddenly cut," Serena asked.

Cameron raised a hand. "Not here. Let's go to the Ranger HQ. Kellyn needs to hear this, and this way we won't have to explain the same thing twice. I was on a call with him when the explosion disrupted the signal, and he'll be anxious to hear the rest of the story."

Nobody disagreed. After a small detour to drop Cameron's Pokemon at the Pokemon Center, everybody went to the Ranger HQ. Once there, a Ranger led them to a meeting room where Kellyn was already waiting for them, closing the door.

"No one will bother us until it's an emergency," Kellyn began, his arms crossed. "Now you said that a bunch of Nuclear Pokemon attacked you?"

"Exactly. They appeared all of sudden and attacked us without reason," Clemont was the one who answered.

"If they attacked the new plant, they must have had a reason, even if it doesn't look obvious to us," Kellyn deduced. "Did they attack only the plant, or did they also attack other spots? Like the Rest House, the clinic, or the port?"

"At first, the Power Plant," Lilia replied. "Though, after they kicked us from there, they chased us all the way out to the port. It was obvious they wanted the power plant, but they didn't want us to leave that place alive."

"Now that we made that clear... what reason would compel those Pokemon to attack the power plant?" Kellyn asked. "Was there something in the plant that could draw their interest?"

"Nuclear fuel?" Serena asked a bit sheepishly. "I remember Cameron saying that they brought it not too long ago."

"By that I meant almost three months ago," Cameron explained. "And we never had an incident with the wild Nuclear Pokemon until now, with the exceptions of a few stray here and there that wandered too far. Besides, the way they... no, that's stupid," Cameron said, shaking his head.

"What is stupid, Cameron? What's on your mind?" Kellyn asked.

"Well... this isn't the first time I had to fight against Nuclear Pokemon. But the way they fought... they had a level of coordination never seen in wild Pokemon, Nuclear or otherwise," he began, placing a hand under his chin. "It almost felt like somebody was controlling them."

"Controlling them? Heh, I can't imagine anybody being able to get one of those Pokemon to obey them, much less all of them," Ash said. "Remember what the PST said when we tried to use them?"

"That's why I said it was stupid. But that's the feeling I had when me and the security members were fighting them. They felt less like a disorganized rabble and more like a coordinated army," Cameron said.

"Could it be the job of Team Omega?" Ash suggested.

"Perhaps. Though, if Team Omega has found a way to bind Nuclear Pokemon to their will... I fear for the future of this region," Cameron said.

Kelyn opened his mouth to say something, but that moment one of his Rangers, a young man with dark blue hair, entered the room, looking agitated.

"Chief Ranger! We're getting calls from all across Bealbeach!" the Ranger almost shouted. "They're reporting attacks from frenzied wild Pokemon with unusual coloration!"

"Frenzied wild-?"

"Nuclear Pokemon," Cameron declared.

"Nuclear Pokemon? All the way on Bealbeach?" Lilia asked. "That can't be possible!"

"We can wonder about the how later! Send every available Ranger into the city! We need to contain this menace!" Kelyn ordered.

"Yes, sir!" the Ranger replied, as he ran out of the room to deliver the orders.

"Let us help! We already have experience in dealing with Nuclear Pokemon!" Ash offered.

"Normally I wouldn't want civilians, trainers or not, to get in the way. But I have the feeling that we're going to need all the possible help, so you and your friends are welcome to come with us."

"Bonnie, stay here and wait for me to return. It might be dangerous out there, and I can't battle and keep an eye on you at the same time," Clemont told Bonnie.

"Don't worry for your brother. I'll make sure nothing happens to him," Lilia reassured her.

And for once, Bonnie didn't protest.

...

"Alright, you already know the points of the attacks! We're going to be spread as thin as possible, so expect no reinforcements if things turn awry! Groups no bigger than four but no smaller than two!" Kellyn ordered, as he led a troop of Rangers into the city, each of them followed by their partner Pokemon. "Our priority is to save the civilians and escort them to a safe place, everything else is secondary!"

"Yes sir!" The Rangers chorused in unison, as they began to split in small groups of two and three.

"What about us, sir?" Ash asked. "Should we split as well?"

"In your case, you better stick together," Kellyn replied. Then, he tapped his earpiece, and frowned. "Apparently, there's a large number of Nuclear Pokemon besieging the Department Store. Can you take care of that?"

"Sure, leave them in our hands!" Ash assured him.

"If there are places in need of your assistance, I'll let you know," Kellyn said, as he left with a couple of Rangers.

"I've already been to the Department Store, so I know the best way to get there! Come on guys, follow me!" Serena said, as she led the group towards the building in question.

Of course, with all the chaos going on, the path towards the department store wasn't going to be a walk in the park. As they rushed through the ample streets of the city, they could see plenty of people running away from the coming Nuclear Pokemon. They could see several Nuclear Owten, Eshouten, Tancoon, Ekans, and even some Arbok chasing and attacking people and Pokemon alike.

"Orchynx, I choose you!" Ash said, sending his Grass and Steel-type starter.

"Sylveon, go!" Serena said.

"Eevee, go!" Clemont followed.

"Come on Buneary!" Lilia told her walking Pokemon, who took a step forward to battle, while she also grabbed a pokeball of her own. "You too, Hagoop!"

The pokeball opened, revealing a rather strange looking Pokemon: it had an elongated body, dark blue in color, with lime green short forelegs and hind legs, its lower jaw of the same color, and its upper face covered by a yellow crest that flared to the sides.

"What kind of Pokemon is that?" Ash asked, as he pulled out his Pokedex to scan it.

" *Hagoop, the Slime Worm Pokemon. Electric/Poison. Its body exudes a sticky slime that protects its soft flesh. It traps prey in the slime and delivers a lightning shock through its whiskers,*" the Pokedex explained.

"A Pokemon I caught here recently. You may ask anything you want about it once this mess is over!" Lilia said.

Upon seeing the newcomers and their Pokemon, several Nuclear Pokemon decided to change their targets, and moved towards the group. Among them, a flock of Owten, led by a couple Eshouten. The Observer Pokemon dived at them, firing a salvo of Air Slash, Gamma

Ray and Shadow Balls, forcing the group to scatter around the street.

"Hagoop, Shockwave!" Lilia ordered.

"Sylveon, Swift!" Serena shouted.

Hagoop's body crackled with electricity, before sending several bolts towards the flying Nuclear Pokemon, while Sylveon waved her feelers, sending a flurry of golden stars. Both the lightning bolts and the stars homed onto the airborne Pokemon, knocking down a couple and harming others. This did nothing but make them even angrier.

"Orchynx, Metal Claw!" Ash ordered.

"Eevee, Quick Attack!" Clemont followed.

Both the Kitten Pokemon and the Evolution Pokemon charged towards the incoming group of Chynmunk, Ekans and Tanscure. Orchynx's claws began to glow with a silvery sheen, and delivered a powerful swipe to an Ekans' face, followed by another one to a Chynmunk's body, while Eevee slammed with his whole body against a Tancoon, sending it rolling backwards against a Kinetmunk.

The Nuclear Pokemon were undeterred, but neither were Orcynx and Eevee, who let the enemy Pokemon come at them. An Ekans lunged at Eevee, jaws wide open, but all that they tasted was Eevee's Iron Tail, while Orchynx knocked a pair of Tancoon with a well-aimed X-Scissor.

That moment, Ash's Pokegear rang. Upon accepting the call, Kellyn's face appeared on the screen.

"Ash, sorry to bother you so soon, but there has been an unforeseen incident that it's going to make our work much harder: our Stylers don't work on these Nuclear Pokemon, meaning that we only have

our partners to fight them," Kellyn explained. "A Nuclear Gyarados has appeared in the northern beach, and our Rangers are having great difficulties taking it down. Given that you recently defeated Cali's strongest team, I imagine a Gyarados wouldn't be much for you. Could you go there and assist them?"

"Understood. Leave it to me!" Ash said.

"One last thing. I know it's a tall order, but try to capture said Gyarados if possible, not only to ensure that it won't cause any more damage, but because our scientists could study such Pokemon in order to understand them better," the Head Ranger told him.

"Alright, I will!" Ash said, before closing the Pokegear down. "Guys, I'm sorry, but they need my help at the beach! A Nuclear Gyarados is making a ruckus there!"

Everybody shivered upon hearing the words *Nuclear Gyarados* .

"Don't worry Ash, go! Serena, Lilia and I should be enough to protect the people around the Department Store!" Clemont told him.

"Take care! Come Orchynx!" Ash called his Grass and Steel-type.

The Kitten Pokemon disengaged the Nuclear Pokemon she was fighting, and followed Ash as he ran in the direction of the beach. Unsurprisingly, as soon as they did, a group of Nuclear Chynmunk quickly moved to intercept them. Fortunately for Ash, Sylveon also jumped in the way, shielding the retreating trainer with her body, and resisting the Chynmunk's attacks with Protect.

"Well done, Sylveon!" Serena praised her Pokemon, before pulling out another pokeball. "Quetzoral, go!"

The pokeball opened, releasing Serena's flying snake-bird, her wings spread, flying above them. The moment she appeared, a squad of Nuclear Gligar homed onto her, but she was quick enough to receive them with a powerful Razor Leaf.

Since Orchynx had left, that meant that Eevee was now alone against the horde of Nuclear Pokemon, and thus he was forced to fall back where Lilia's Buneary and Hagoop were fighting.

"Clemont, let's try to push forward while Serena covers our rear!" Lilia suggested, while her Buneary protected her from a Nuclear Tancoon with a Double Kick, while her Hagoop blasted a diving Eshouten with a Sludge Wave.

"Alright! Come out, Bunnelby and Eletux!" Clemont said, throwing two more pokeballs forward, releasing his Normal-type bunny and Water and Electric-type Tandorian starter, the two of them appearing at each side of Eevee. The three of them charged forward, Eletux breaking the Nuclear Pokemon's ranks with powerful Water Guns, while Eevee and Bunnelby barreled towards them with a combination of Quick Attack and Wild Charge.

"Serena, how far away is the Department Store?" Clemont asked.

"We need to follow this street until the third block, then turn left, walk several more blocks until we get to a plaze, and it's there!"

"It might sound like it's close, but with all these Nuclear Pokemon in the way... we better hurry!" Clemont said.

...

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu warned, while pointing back.

"Got it! Aveden, behind us! Air Cutter!" Ash ordered.

The Bliss Bird Pokemon, who had been flying above Ash, Pikachu and Orchynx, made a U-turn as he flapped his wings, releasing several blades of compressed air that slammed against a pair of Nuclear Gligar, the two Pokemon knocked out of the air the moment the attack connected.

After leaving the group, Ash decided to release Aveden as well in order to act as a short range scout and to protect him and his groundbound Pokemon from sneaky airborne attack, a decision that immediately paid off, given how many Nuclear fliers attempted to attack them.

"Good eye there, Pikachu," Ash praised the electric mouse.

Pikachu smiled confidently and nodded. Just because he couldn't fight didn't mean that he couldn't help Ash and the others.

"Cooor!"

A high pitched cry alerted Ash of several Nuclear Corsola nearby, who immediately began to run towards Ash the moment they saw him and his Pokemon, and quickly began to launch attacks, forcing Ash and his Pokemon to fall back in order to dodge the streams of water, falling rocks, and green radioactive beams.

"Aveden, Mirror Shot!" Ash ordered.

The Corsola didn't notice Aveden flying above them, advantage the bird capitalized on by hitting them with accurate metal hued beams of light, causing the coral Pokemon to screech in pain, creating the opening Ash needed.

"Orchynx now, take them down with-"

"Help! Somebody help us!" a woman wailed.

Before finishing his command, he could see a woman in her forties, shielding a pair of children he believed were hers with her own body, as she tried to fend off a pair of Nuclear Tancoon by ineffectively swinging her purse at them.

"Orchynx, take them down with Iron Tail!" Ash said, managing to regain his focus. As his trusty kitty dealt with the Corsola, Ash grumbled something under his breath as he pulled another pokeball

from his clip. "Dunsparce, I choose you! Use Rollout on those Tancoon!"

The pokeball was tossed in the direction of the woman, releasing the Land Snake Pokemon. The moment Dunsparce materialized, he curled into a ball and rolled towards the unsuspecting Tancoon, steamrolling them with ease, and startling the woman.

"Uh..." the woman then looked at Ash, clearly still in shock, before yelling "Thank you!" and running away with her kids.

Ash sighed, looking at the defeated Tancoon and Corsola around him. "Thank goodness Nuclear Pokemon are pretty fragile, or else this could be quite the mess..."

A loud roar in the distance reminded Ash that this was still quite the big mess, as he saw a dark blue and bright green Gyarados slither its way into the city.

"Guys, let's go!" Ash said, as he rushed towards the Atrocious Pokemon, as opposed to the people running away from it, with Orchynx running in front of him and Dunsparce lagging behind, slithering as fast as his body allowed him to.

"We need to draw its attention to us! Aveden, fly forward and use Air Cutter!" Ash said.

The Bliss Bird Pokemon flapped his wings with more vigor than usual in order to reach the Nuclear menace, and once he was close enough, he sent a pair of blades of compressed air towards Gyarados. The attack connected, and the naturally temperamental Pokemon -while Nuclear Pokemon were far more aggressive than their regular counterparts, Ash doubted that a Gyarados would change that much in that regard- turned around, and tried to chomp Aveden down.

"Aveden, fall back!" Ash said. Not that his order was that necessary, as the blue bird quickly flew away from the Nuclear Pokemon, who

crawled its way towards Ash. "Orchynx, Energy Ball! Dunsparce, Ancient Power!"

"Chynx!"

"Dun!"

Orchynx opened her mouth, forming a sphere of green glowing energy in front of it, as Dunsparce summoned a circle of glowing golden boulders that spun around him, before both attacks were launched at the colossal Nuclear Pokemon, causing the Gyarados to roar in pain.

"GYAAAAA!" Even if Nuclear Pokemon were pretty fragile, that Gyarados was rather resilient. Glaring at the Pokemon and the human below him with its eerie emerald eyes, the Atrocious Pokemon opened its mouth, releasing a deluge of green sludge at them.

"MOVE!" Ash shouted, as he jumped backwards, his Pokemon doing the same.

The attack splashed the green sludge all around the place, though fortunately it didn't reach neither human nor Pokemon. And lucky for them, as the sludge quickly began to eat the asphalt, producing a sizzling noise as plumes of green smoke rose into the sky.

"Pi, pika?" Pikachu asked.

"No idea. I don't think I ever saw an attack like that," Ash said, his eyes open wide, half awed and half horrified at the destructive power of the corrosive attack. "Must be a Nuclear-type move..."

The Nuclear Gyarados prepared to attack again, this time with a move Ash knew, as the radioactive creature raised its tail, which was covered in a cloak of tempestuous water.

"That's Aqua Tail! Orchynx, dodge it! Aveden, pick Dunsparce and carry it above Gyarados!" Ash quickly ordered, the gears in his brain turning fast as it formed a strategy to take down such a challenging foe.

Aveden swooped down and caught Dunsparce, catching the Land Snake Pokemon between his talons, and with a great amount of effort, he managed to lift his irascible partner into the sky, just as Gyarados slammed its only appendage into the spot Orchynx had been not even a moment ago, resulting in an explosion of water.

"Orchynx, Energy Ball again! Rapid fire!" Ash ordered, his eyes fixed on Aveden, still carrying Dunsparce, as he slowly began to hover above Gyarados.

Orchynx opened her mouth, firing a salvo of less powerful Energy Balls at the Nuclear Gyarados. Upon being pelted with the green glowing orbs, the Atrocious Pokemon directed a frightening glare at the Kitten Pokemon, and opened its mouth wide, preparing another attack.

"Aveden, drop Dunsparce, and Dunsparce, use Rollout!" Ash quickly shouted.

Aveden unceremoniously released his cargo, letting out a deep pant of relief now that he no longer had to fly with such a heavy load, as Dunsparce curled into a ball and began to spin. Thanks to gravity, he managed to build a lot of momentum before his curled body slammed into the Gyarados' head, interrupting its attack.

"Well done! Now Orchynx, Iron Tail!" Ash said.

"Orrrr!" Orchynx meowed loudly as she dashed towards the momentarily dazed Gyarados, her tail turning stiff and glowing with a metallic sheen. She leaped towards the Nuclear Pokemon, and once she was close enough, delivered an overhead smash with her iron-hard tail.

Gyarados let out another roar of pain, though this one lacked the anger of the previous ones, before it collapsed on the ground, seemingly defeated for good.

"Alright, done!" Ash said, as he pulled out an empty pokeball.
"Pokeball go!"

Ash chucked the pokeball at the unconscious Pokemon, which was turned into pure energy and absorbed inside, before falling to the ground.

One shake.

Two shakes.

BANG!

"WHOA!"

Before Ash could claim a new Pokemon, the pokeball exploded as if somebody had put a bomb inside. Ash had seen many Pokemon breaking out of a pokeball to resist capture, but he had never seen a pokeball bursting like a balloon. He tossed another pokeball, but the result was the same. Then a third one, but no luck either.

"This is weird... does this mean Nuclear Pokemon can't be normally caught?" Ash asked, scratching his temple. "But Clemont told me he had caught Geigeroach with no problem... but then again, Geigeroach allowed himself to be caught... maybe that's why those Team Omega grunts kept them in steel cages rather than catching them in pokeballs," he reasoned. He took a look at Gyarados, lying in front of him. "Hopefully, it will stay put until the Rangers can keep everything under control" Ash said, allowing himself to let his guard down for a second, before turning to his Pokemon. "Great job, guys!"

"Ave!" Aveden chirped in return.

"Duuuun..." Dunsparce pretended he didn't care about Ash's praise.

Orchynx, however, didn't say anything, she just stood in place, completely stiff. Ash tilted his head quizzically.

"Orchynx? Are you-"

Ash was interrupted by a crackling noise, followed by the Kitten Pokemon glowing with a bluish white light. The Kitten Pokemon began to grow, quickly turning into another Pokemon. After a few seconds, the transformation was complete, and the light disappeared, revealing the new Pokemon, who spoke for the first time.

"METAL!"

The new Pokemon in front of Ash was a large feline. Gone was Orchynx's cute appearance, replaced now with a fierce visage. Her previously lithe body was more well built, with many light green stripes across her head and legs, as well as yellow flower-shaped dots on her back. One foreleg and one of her hind legs were entirely made of metal, almost looking like robotic limbs, and her tail now had a sharp edge and was curved, almost looking like a sickle.

Ash stood there, looking at the new Pokemon with his mouth agape, before he regained his bearings, and his open mouth curved into a wide grin.

"Orchynx, you evolved!" Ash almost squealed. He hastily pulled out his Pokedex. "Let's see what you're now..."

" *Metalynx, the Armored Pokemon, and Orchynx's evolution. Grass/Steel. Metalynx stalk their prey in packs. Their brutally sharp tail blades are their main weapon,*" the Pokedex explained.

"Yeah, I can see that," Ash said, as his eyes drifted to the sharp glaive that was Metalynx's tail. "So, um, Metalynx?"

Metalynx turned around, piercing Ash with a fierce glare. Ash had to fight the urge to step back as the large, metal-clad feline stalked

towards him...

"Uh?"

... and began to affectionately rub her head against Ash's chest, purring playfully. Ash sighed in relief, relaxed, and began to scratch Metalynx under her chin.

"Heh, good girl..." Ash chuckled, before he gently pushed Metalynx's head away. "Though sadly we'll have to leave that for later. I'm pretty sure that there are plenty of Nuclear Pokemon terrorizing innocent people," Ash said, looking around at the empty streets, devoid of both people and Pokemon. An eerie silence reigned over. "... or so I thought. This feels way too quiet."

Ash and his Pokemon continued wandering through the streets. There were some traces of battle here and there, like turned over trash containers, skewered street lamps, burnt marks on walls and the ground, and a few broken glasses here and there. But so far, no sign of any combatant.

"Pi, pikapi!" Pikachu warned, as he pointed to a turning.

Ash looked into that direction, expecting to see another Nuclear Pokemon approaching, but saw something that, while he wasn't expecting to find in a situation like this one, wasn't surprised to see either: A man wearing a Team Omega uniform disappearing behind a corner.

"Team Omega. I knew they were behind this," Ash said, as he grabbed his three empty pokeballs, returning Aveden, Dunsparce and Metalynx to them. "Better if you guys return. I need to follow him and see what those criminals are doing here without them seeing me. Plus you guys could use a little rest. I have the feeling that I'm going to need you again soon..."

Moving as stealthily as he could, Ash followed the same path the Team Omega grunt was taking. He disappeared from his sight a few

times, but Ash was always able to track him down again. The man didn't appear to be worried that somebody was following him. Perhaps Team Omega was taking advantage of this attack in order to carry out another of their plans.

Not while Ash was in the city.

Eventually, Ash could hear sounds of battle going in the distance, as well as people yelling. He wondered if he should stop following the grunt and join the battle instead, innocent people might be in danger after all. Though, fortunately, in the end he didn't need to take a decision, as the grunt was heading towards the same spot the yells and battle noises were coming from.

Then, after taking one last turn, Ash saw it.

In the middle of a large intersection, there were many Team Omega grunts battling a horde of Nuclear Pokemon with Pokemon of their own, many of them Steel-types. All of the grunts were carrying large backpacks, similar to the one Clemont used to carry. And the similarities didn't end there, as said backpacks also featured their very own Aipom Arms, which they used to snatch the Nuclear Pokemon once they've been weakened enough, and lock them inside the same metal cages Ash had seen them using in the abandoned Power Plant.

Even with all his Pokemon, Ash knew he couldn't defeat so many people on his own. He opened his Pokegear, and dialed a number, hoping he could summon some help to his side.

Author's Note: Yeah, turns out our heroes weren't able to enjoy some R & R after Serena won that contest. Though if you played the game, you probably saw this coming. Also, sorry for interrupting Serena just when she was about to kiss Ash. I'm afraid such moment will need a little more buildup before it can happen (because it WILL happen, I can assure you that). Still, I hope you enjoyed the amourshipping moments before the

nuclear catastrophe happened. There will be more in the following chapters (though not the next one, since that one will be more action).

And contrary to what most people believed, Serena didn't win those cruise tickets. Sorry girl, but no cruise for you. Better luck next time.

And as you can see, Team Omega isn't done just yet in Bealbeach City, as they're pocketing quite a lot of Nuclear Pokemon.

Also, sorry to all of you who were expecting Ash to own a Nuclear Gyarados. While you can use any Pokeball to catch Nuclear-types in the game, I felt it would make the Nuclear-type Pokemon more menacing if they were impossible to catch through normal means. That's it, unless they allow themselves to be caught, just like Clemont's Geigeroach. At least Ash can enjoy being the proud trainer of a Metalynx now.

Thanks to Fox McCloude, MegaSalamence64, hirowriter and Viroro-kun for reviewing the previous chapter, and special thanks to Viroro-kun for his awesome job as betareader, whose edits and suggestions made this chapter so much better.

Will our heroes be able to save Bealbeach City, or will the city fall to the nuclear horde? And what of Team Omega? Sre they here just to catch Nuclear Pokemon, or are they after something else? All these questions will be answered next chapter. In the meantime, don't forget to drop a review on this one.

Gamma and Omega

Chapter 28:

Gamma and Omega

Bealbeach City

When Serena arrived at Bealbeach City, she was expecting many things.

That she would win her third ribbon, and hopefully Ash would win his third badge. Both of which did happen, so no complaints about that there.

She also expected to say goodbye to Clemont. An inevitability, but one she had already been mentally preparing herself for.

She also expected to enjoy one of the beaches the city was famous for. Bask in the sun while having some ice cream, play in the water with Ash, Bonnie and her Pokemon, maybe finally muster the courage to tell Ash how she truly felt about him.

She wasn't expecting to have to fight a horde of frenzied, radioactive Pokemon. Or having to infiltrate a ruined power plant in order to rescue Bonnie from a gang of criminals. Or having to defend the city from a second, even larger horde of more berserker, radioactive Pokemon.

Fortunately for her and her companions, the Nuclear Pokemon proved to be just as fragile as those they fought at the island of the Nuclear Plant Epsilon. Unfortunately, though, they were proving to be without numbers as well. Still, they were making some progress, with Clemont and Lilia opening a path towards the store, and Serena defending their rear.

"Sylveon, Moonblast! Quetzoral, Drill Peck!" Serena ordered.

A few Nuclear Chyilmunk led by a couple Kinetmunk were blasted by a sphere of white and pink light, while Quetzoral sent a nearby Gligar crashing down by jabbing her spinning beak into the Fly Scorpion's Pokemon body.

"Well done!" Serena cheered.

"Cooooooooor!"

Unfortunately, her victory was short lived as new enemies took the place of previous ones, this time, a trio of Nuclear Corsola led by a Nuclear Corsoreef, who quickly fired Water Guns and Rock Slides at Sylveon and Quetzoral.

"Sylveon, Protect! Quetzoral, Razor Leaf from above!"

Sylveon created a green energy field around herself, blocking the barrage of water streams and falling rocks, while Quetzoral bombarded the Nuclear Pokemon with a barrage of sharp-edged leaves. The enemy Pokemon tried to move in order to dodge it, but one of the Corsolas wasn't fast enough and was knocked out by the super effective attack.

Meanwhile, Clemont and Lilia's Pokemon continued to fight on the front, against a number of enemies superior to those Serena had to deal with.

"Bunnelby, Wild Charge! Eevee, Iron Tail!" Clemont said.

While Eevee used his Steel-empowered tail to smack a few Nuclear Costraw around, Bunnelby's body was charged with electricity, and barreled towards a nearby Nuclear Baaschaf. Unfortunately, the Hard Horn Pokemon had seen the rabbit coming, as it generated claws of green glowing energy around its hands, similar to a Dragon Claw, but with the sickly shade of green of the Nuclear attacks.

"BAA!" Baaschaaf bleated, as it delivered a devastating swipe at Bunnelby, who was launched backwards while the electricity around

his body was abruptly dispelled.

"Bunnelby!" Clemont cried upon seeing his Pokemon in pain.

"Ev?"

"Eary!"

Both Eevee and Buneary turned around and went to immediately assist Bunnelby. Eevee surprised the Nuclear Baaschaun with a Quick Attack, which was followed by Buneary's Power-Up Punch. Still, the two attacks weren't enough to take down the hard horn Pokemon, who looked even angrier right now.

"BAAA! BAAAA!" Baaschaf bleated, as it cupped its hands, forming a sphere of pure darkness, before thrusting its hands forward, the sphere exploding into a beam of the same color.

"Everybody, move!" Clemont shouted.

While Eevee dragged Bunnelby out of the Dark Pulse's way, Buneary remained in the path, looking at both the attack and the Pokemon that launched it with her defiant, beady eyes. The fluff of one of her ears began to shine with a light blue glow, as bits of ice and frost began to gather around it, before swinging it forward towards the incoming attack.

"Buneary, what are you doing!?" Lilia almost screamed.

Fortunately, it looked that Buneary's Ice Punch was able to withhold the Dark Pulse, which was split into smaller streams of dark energy. Eventually the Dark Pulse ceased, and Buneary was still there, if breathing heavily.

"Bu, bu..." the Rabbit Pokemon panted.

"Buneary, are you alright?" Lilia asked, looking at her main Pokemon with worried eyes.

There was a crackling noise, followed by Buneary's entire body glowing with a bluish white light, as she began to grow and change.

"Whoa! Buneary is evolving!" Clemont pointed out, as he and his Pokemon looked in awe.

Lilia was in awe as well, though she was snapped out of it when she saw the Nuclear Baaschaun charging at the still evolving Buneary through the corner of her eye. Fortunately, the bespectacled girl still had another Pokemon out that was fast enough to intervene.

"Hagoop, stop it with Sludge!" she ordered.

The Slime Worm Pokemon opened its mouth, releasing a wave of purple mud towards the charging Baaschaun, who was forced to use the attack it was preparing to use on Buneary in order to counter Hagoop's. However, this managed to buy a couple more seconds for Buneary to finish evolving.

"Lopunny!" the newly evolved Pokemon cried, as she took a battle stance.

"BAAA!"

It seemed the Baaschaf was still fixated on taking down Lopunny, as it charged once again, this time both its limbs glowing white, probably for a Fighting-type move.

"PUNNY!"

However, once the Hard Horn Pokemon was in range, she jumped and delivered a powerful roundhouse kick to its face. Baaschaun's attack was canceled, and the poor Nuclear Pokemon was sent crashing facefirst against a nearby garage door. It then collapsed on the ground, and made no attempt to get back on its feet.

Lilia sighed in relief.

"Wow, that was a pretty strong Jump Kick!" Clemont praised, looking at the newly evolved Pokemon with no small amount of reverence.

"Lopunny must have learned it upon evolving. Great timing, because we're going to need every advantage we can get in order to beat these Nuclear Pokemon," Lilia added.

"Say, are you guys okay?" Serena asked, as she and Sylveon walked towards the duo.

"Thanks to a very timely evolution, we are," Lilia said, briefly drawing attention to her newly evolved Lopunny. "How long until the department store?"

"We turn that corner, and it should be there. Come on, we're almost there," Serena said.

Clemont and Lilia nodded, as the two of them as well as their Pokemon followed Serena. And just like the honey blonde had said, the towering building that was the Bealbeach City Department Store loomed over them. While only a few hours ago it was a shining building of spotless light metal and glass, it had now many marks of a battle going on both inside and outside, such as cracks, broken windows, busted pipes, and chunks of masonry missing.

And the noises and yells coming from the inside revealed that said battles were still going on, and that many innocents were in danger.

"Here we are. Let's-WHOA!"

Serena was interrupted by a powerful geyser suddenly blowing up a manhole cover less than a couple meters away from her. The group abruptly stopped their march and took a couple steps back, their Pokemon preparing for battle.

"Good grief, what now!?" Clemont whined.

When the geyser finally stopped, they could see a group of several Nuclear Pokemon in front of them, having emerged from the geyser, radiating aggression and killing intent. Too bad it failed to have an effect on the trio and their Pokemon, for one detail.

"KARP! KARP! MAGIKARP!"

These Nuclear Pokemon were Magikarp. Unfortunately for them, despite their mutation and new Nuclear-type, they were just as threatening as regular old Magikarp (that was, not much), and all they could do was flop helplessly towards the trio of trainers.

For their part, they could only stare dumbfoundedly at the Nuclear Magikarp flopping at them, doing nothing more dangerous than trying to splash them with sewer water. Lilia began to chuckle, followed by Serena, followed by Clemont, before they began to laugh.

"Oh boy, and here I was worried," Clemont laughed.

"Honestly, they look kind of comical," Serena added.

"I know, right? Thankfully these won't be much of an obstacle," Lilia said. "Come on, the store is right-"

There was a crackling sound, and one of the Magikarp began to glow with a vibrant emerald light. The three trainers paled as the Fish Pokemon quickly grew into the massive, serpentine shape of its evolved form, which cast a shadow over all of them.

"GYAAAAAA!" the newly evolved Nuclear Gyarados roared.

"Guys... I think that Magikarp didn't take well us not taking it as a threat..." Serena whimpered, as she shrunk under the eerie blank eyes of the Atrocious Pokemon.

In their terror-induced shock, they realized too late that Gyarados' large tail, coated in water, was moving towards them. The Aqua Tail

hit both trainers and Pokemon, resulting in an explosion of water that blasted them backwards, scattering them around the street.

"G-Guys... are you..." Serena tried to get back on her feet, as she coughed the water she had inadvertently swallowed. Upon realizing that something was casting a large shadow over her, she looked up.

Much to her horror, she saw the Nuclear Gyarados towering over her, just before it lunged down with its jaws wide open.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!"

"SYL!"

Luckily for Serena, Sylveon jumped in the way, using Protect in order to repel Gyarados' biting attack (likely a Crunch). Gyarados, however, was undeterred, as it continued attacking, punishing Sylveon's shield with constant head slams, until the Intertwining Pokemon couldn't hold it anymore and the barrier shattered, sending her crashing back against Serena.

"Oof!"

"Ve!"

And that moment, the Nuclear Gyarados opened its mouth wide, a glowing green liquid building up inside it, before spraying trainer and Pokemon with a noxious green shower.

"Syl!" reacting quickly, Sylveon wrapped her feelers around Serena's limbs and hurled her away, out of the Gyarados' attack's area of effect.

"SYLVEON, NO!"

However, Sylveon was unable to dodge the move herself, taking the brunt of the attack. Serena cringed in horror upon hearing the sizzling sound the green glowing liquid made, mixed with Sylveon's cries of pain, horror that only grew bigger upon seeing how the

corrosive substance Gyarados had doused Sylveon with was eating the pavement away.

"I need to return Sylveon right now!" Serena said, as her trembling hands struggled to hold the empty pokeball. "Sylveon, re-"

Before Serena could return her Fairy-type, Gyarados sent her flying against her trainer once again with a powerful Aqua Tail. Sylveon didn't crash against Serena this time around, but it passed her close enough to graze Serena, knocking her off-balance and making her drop her pokeball, before the Intertwining Pokemon crashed against a wall, and finally dropped on the sidewalk.

"Sylveon!" Serena cried again, as she stumbled towards her battered Pokemon, as Gyarados slithered menacingly towards the two of them.

"Quet!"

Quetzoral dived from above, slamming into Gyarados's head with a powerful Drill Peck, and drawing the Nuclear Pokemon's attention away from her trainer.

"Bun!"

"Evui!"

Fortunately for Quetzoral, Clemont's two Pokemon rejoined the battle. Bunnelby, his body coated in yellow sparks, slammed against Gyarados' face, quickly followed by Eevee's Iron Tail. That was enough for the Atrocious Pokemon to forget about its two preys and switch targets.

"Serena!" Clemont said, as he and Lilia quickly rushed to her, the latter helping her wounded Lopunny walk while her Hagoop dragged behind. The two of them had some bruises and cuts all over their bodies, no doubt caused by the Gyarados' attack, while Lilia also

had her glasses slightly cracked. Clemont picked Sylveon's pokeball on the ground and returned it to the honey blonde. "Are you okay?"

"Thank you," she said, as she was finally able to return her beaten Fairy-type. "I've been better, but I can go on."

"Sorry for not coming to your help earlier, that Aqua Tail got a lot out of us," Lilia said, as she helped Serena back on her feet.

"GYAAA!"

The trio turned to Gyarados, who breathed a stream of dark blue flames at Eevee and Bunnelby, an attack they identified as Dragon Rage. The former was able to jump in time, but the latter tripped and took the attack, but Bunnelby was too slow and was engulfed by the attack. Eevee then fired a Shadow Ball in order to force Gyarados to cancel the attack and save his partner. His goal was successful, but once the flames dispelled, the Digging Pokemon laid there, motionless.

"Bunnelby!" Clemont cried.

"Lop!" Lopunny shouted as well.

"I was saving Luxray for later, but there's no way Eevee and Quetzal alone can defeat that Pokemon on their own," Clemont said, grabbing Luxray's pokeball with a shaky hand. "Luxray-"

Before Clemont could call his strongest Pokemon, there was a crackling sound, and Eevee began to glow. His body first shone with the bluish white light, which quickly turned bright green, the same shade the Nuclear Magikarp took before evolving. Eevee then began to grow and change his form. The three humans tried to discern what Eevee was evolving into, but the shape Eevee was taking wasn't something neither trainer could recall.

And indeed, once the evolution was complete, a Pokemon none of them had seen before laid before their eyes.

"What... what kind of Pokemon is that?" Clemont almost shouted, adjusting his glasses.

The Pokemon in front of them looked similar to other Eeveelutions, only its body was bright gray with a white underbelly, green feet, and three blue eyes on his face. Curiously, that wasn't the most striking part of the Pokemon, but the six metal-like triangles that floated next to his body: two of them above his head mimicking ears, another on his rear making it look like a tail, and three of them floating around a small, round green orb on his chest, looking like the radiation symbol.

"NUCLEON!" he yelled, his voice sounding somewhat mechanical and distorted.

"Nu... Nucleon? That's your name?" Clemont asked.

"Clemont... that looks like a Nuclear Pokemon..." Lilia whimpered, as she latched onto the boy's arm.

A knot formed on Serena's stomach as an idea of what this Pokemon was formed in her mind. Wordlessly, she pulled out her pokedex and scanned the new Eeveelution.

" Nucleon, the Atomic Pokemon, and one of Eevee's multiple evolutions. Nuclear. Nucleon is one of the few non-feral Nuclear Pokémon. It's theorized that its bond with its trainer when it was an Eevee allows it to stay in control." the Pokedex explained.

"GYAAA!"

The Nuclear Gyarados wasn't fazed by Eevee's evolution, and, interestingly enough, it didn't see Nucleon as one of its allies now, given that it tried to chomp him between its jaws. Thankfully, Nucleon managed to jump in time.

"Nu, nucleon!" he yelled, as the orb on his chest began to shine with a shimmering green light, firing an energy beam of the same color

that formed a spiraling pattern as it moved. Despite clearly being a Nuclear attack, the move caused enough damage to Gyarados in order to make it cry in pain and recoil.

"Hagoop, Shockwave!" Lilia called.

"Quetzoral, Energy Ball!" Serena followed.

The Slime Worm Pokemon's body began to crackle with yellow sparks, as it sent a barrage of electrical bolts of the same color towards the Nuclear Pokemon, as Quetzoral formed a green sphere of energy in front of her beak, before launching it at the Atrocious Pokemon.

The two super effective attacks connected, intensifying Gyarados' roars of pain, until it couldn't take it anymore, and collapsed on the ground with a loud boom, unable to remain conscious.

With the Nuclear behemoth defeated, and no more Nuclear Pokemon outside the store other than the Magikarp, the trio allowed themselves to relax. Lilia let out a huge sigh of relief, while Clemont finally returned the defeated Bunnelby.

"Thank goodness..." the bespectacled girl said.

"To think that Ash was called to fight one on his own..." Serena said, a worry for her friend and crush began to creep up her back.

"Especially since he can't rely on Pikachu to battle for the time being."

"Ash is a very strong trainer, and he still has Greninja. He will be fine," Clemont said. That moment, his pokegear began to ring. Looking at the screen, the blond raised an eyebrow. "Speaking of which, he's calling right now. Hey there, Ash."

"Clemont!" Ash said upon appearing on the small screen. "I have a small problem here. The Nuclear Gyarados is accounted for, but I found several Team Omega thugs snatching Nuclear Pokemon!"

"What!?" Clemont shouted.

"Team Omega? The same criminals you fought on the abandoned plant?" Lilia asked.

"We have to stop them from leaving with the Nuclear Pokemon, but I could use some help. Can any of you come here and lend me a hand?" he asked.

Clemont, Lilia and Serena looked at each other, as if silently debating which one of them should go to help Ash, that's it, if they could afford to leave.

"Clemont, you better go and help Ash. Lilia and I will take care of the Department Store," Serena said, taking the decision herself.

"Are you sure?" Clemont asked.

"Yes. Go and help Ash," it was Lilia who answered. "Serena might have lost Sylveon, but she still has most of her Pokemon, as do I. We will be fine."

"I'm not happy with leaving the two of you here on your own, but if Ash needs my help..." Clemont said, before turning at the pokegear again. "Ash, I'm coming for you. Make sure you have your GPS signal active so I can track you!"

"It should be on since I never switch it off," Ash replied. "Anyway, I'm going to face those Team Omega goons right now. See you here!"

The call ended, and the pokegear's screen returned to the main menu. Clemont sighed, this time not out of relief, but of exhaustion for the troubles ahead of him.

"As if the Nuclear Pokemon attacking the city wasn't enough... I better get going. Nucleon, return!" Clemont said, returning his second Nuclear Pokemon to his pokeball. As he began to run away

from the department store, he turned back one last time to say: "Be careful!"

"Don't worry, we will!" Lilia assured him.

"Come on, let's see if the people inside the department store need our help," Serena said, as she began to run towards the aforementioned place. Lilia nodded and followed her.

"KARP!"

Two more crackling noises made the two girls stop on their tracks, and much to their mounting horror, they saw not one, but two Nuclear Magikarp evolving again.

"This has to be a freaking joke!" Lilia shouted.

"If just one gave us so much trouble... what are we going to do against two, and without Clemont?" Serena asked, taking a step back, shrinking under the Gyarados' terrifying glare.

The Gyarados loomed over the two girls, ready to attack. But suddenly...

"Gyarados, Bounce!" they heard a familiar voice say.

... a Mega Gyarados descended from the sky, its shadow covering the two Nuclear Pokemon, before it landed on top of them, crushing them under its weight, opening a crater on the spot and causing a small tremor. The hit was so brutal, the two Nuclear Gyarados were knocked out on the spot. Serena and Lilia could see that there was a blue haired woman riding on Gyarados' head.

"You okay, girls?"

"Cali!" Serena squealed in joy upon seeing the city's Gym Leader.

"Yeah, we're okay," Lilia replied. "Thank goodness you showed up. The idea of having to fight those two Nuclear Gyarados..."

"Of course! This is my city, what kind of Gym Leader would I be if I didn't help defend it?" Cali asked. "Say, have you seen more of those nuclear nasties?"

"The Rangers said that there were some of them inside the department store. We were going to help the people inside drive them out," Serena said.

Cali looked at the building in question, and her brow furrowed. "I'm afraid this little fella is too big to enter that place, so I can't help you there," Cali said, patting her Gyarados. "Still, I'm sure I can find plenty of things to do around the city."

"Don't worry, I don't think there will be more Gyarados inside," Lilia said. "If that was the case, we would have seen them already."

"Still, unless I'm needed elsewhere, I'm going to stay around this area to make sure no more of those creeps enter the building," Cali told them.

"Once again, thanks for the save, Cali. Come on Lilia, let's go!" she said, leading the taller girl to the department store.

...

"Drillgan, Drill Run!" a Team Omega grunt yelled.

"Zangoose, Crush Claw!" her partner shouted.

"Tank that Drill Run with Protect, Frosulo!" Ash said. "And Dunsparce, Rollout on Zangoose!"

The Team Omega grunt's Drilgann launched itself forward, its whole body spinning like a living drill, while Frosulo's eyes glowed green creating an energy barrier of the same color around himself. The Drill Run slammed against the shield but failed to cause any harm, knocking Drilgann backwards, while Dunsparce's spinning body slammed against the Cat Ferret pokemon, hurling it backwards.

"Now, Powder Snow!" Ash followed. "And Dunsparce, Poison Jab!"

"Fro!" Frosulo chirped, as he blew a small snowstorm at the Ground and Dark-type Pokemon, who cried in pain as the attack covered it in snow and frost.

"Parce!" Dunsparce cried, stabbing his poison-coated drill tail into Zangoose's side, knocking it out for good.

"Well done, Dunsparce! Now, Frosulo, finish with Signal Beam!" Ash said.

Frosulo fired a rainbow colored energy beam at the half frozen Drill Pokemon. While Davern's Drilgann would still have plenty of fight left, this Pokemon was nowhere near resilient as the ace of a Gym Leader, and was quickly knocked out.

"What the... what's with this kid!?" the female grunt asked, as she returned her defeated Drilgann, while reading the numbers displayed in her visor. "The power of those Pokemon is just ridiculous!"

"I think I know who this guy is! It's Ash Ketchum, the brat that has been disrupting our operations alongside his friends!" her partner replied.

"Exactly," Ash said, walking towards them. "And if you think you're going to take advantage of this catastrophe to bag a few Nuclear Pokemon, you'll have another thing coming!"

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu yelled for added emphasis.

"You might be strong on your own, but there's no way you'll be able to take on all of us!" the female grunt yelled, as she tapped the communicator on her helmet. "Attention everyone, Ash Ketchum is here! And if he's here, the other brats can't be too far! Spread the word! Make sure this message reaches captains Alina and Anika!"

And with that, the pair of grunts turned around and ran away, disappearing from the Kantonian trainer's sight. Ash would have loved nothing more than to apprehend them and have the Rangers lock them behind bars, but neither he nor the Rangers had the time nor the Pokemon to spare in order to bring small-time crooks to justice, not with an horde of Nuclear Pokemon wreaking destruction across the city.

He opened his pokegear and checked the GPS function; Clemont was moving towards him, going much faster than his usual running speed. Maybe a Ranger was giving him a ride? Still, given his current position it would be between five to ten minutes until Clemont would reach him. Perfect. In that time, he could track another group of Team Omega grunts, and with Clemont's help, they would teach those criminals a lesson even faster.

"Time to move. Dunsparce, Frosulo, return!" Ash said, recalling the Land Snake and the Ice Crystal Pokemon, before grabbing a third pokeball and tossing it forward. "Aveden, I choose you!"

"Av, ave!" the Bliss Bird Pokemon cawed upon being released.

"Alright Aveden, see if you can find more of those Team Omega thugs!"

Aveden nodded, and took off into the sky in order to gain enough altitude. He then flew in circles for about a minute and a half before he returned to Ash with his findings.

"Av, den, ave, aveden!" the bluebird cawed.

Ash nodded. "Good! Lead on!"

Ash and Pikachu followed Aveden through the mostly empty streets, with only the occasional Nuclear Pokemon jumping their way, before being quickly dispatched by the Normal and Flying-type Pokemon.

"Ash!" a familiar voice said.

Looking in the direction of the voice, Ash saw Clemont, riding on his Luxray as if it was a steed, explaining how he was able to reach him so fast.

"Clemont!" Ash replied. "I'm glad you could make it. Aveden just found another group of Team Omega thugs in dire need to be taken down, not far away from here."

"Good. Let's go. Thanks for carrying me, Luxray. Take some rest," Clemont said, returning his strongest Pokemon to his pokeball.

The two teens followed Aveden towards the east side of the city, more specifically, towards one of its ports. The port of the east zone was nowhere near as big as the one in the north side, where Lilia had picked them up a couple days ago in her yacht. Still, once they entered the port, they realized what Team Omega might have to do with them.

"Come on, move faster! We still have more than half the cargo to load!" a voice yelled.

Once they got there, Ash and Clemont saw about a dozen or so of Team Omega grunts gathered around a large submarine that was docked on the port. They were slowly loading metal cages containing Nuclear Pokemon inside it, while others kept watch, their Pokemon already out.

Making sure they weren't seen, Ash and Clemont quickly hid behind a large metal container, the two of them peeking behind it, and assessing the situation.

"There are quite a few of them," Clemont observed. "Do you think we'll be able to take them down just between the two of us?"

"We have done that before. Remember how easily we plowed through that base in Kevlar Town?" Ash reminded Clemont. "If there's one of the big shots like that Zebos guy or the twin sisters, then I'd be worried."

"Maybe they are inside the submarine," the Kalosian teen suggested.

"In that case, let's use that to our advantage, and bring down the ones out here first," Ash said, as he grabbed a pokeball. "Are you ready, Clemont?"

The blond teen nodded, steeling himself as he grabbed a pokeball as well.

"Greninja, I choose you!"

"Geigeroach, come out!"

...

When Serena, followed by Lilia, entered the department store lobby, she was surprised to see how little it looked like it did the morning on that very same day. Just like the streets above, there were many signs of fighting, such as burnt marks, cracked walls and floor tiles, broken glasses and pieces of metal and plastic scattered all over the floor, and even some small fires going on.

Their presence didn't go unnoticed, since the moment they entered the lobby, several Nuclear Pokemon -a couple Chynmunk, a Baaschaf and an Ekans- and made their own presence known by jumping seemingly out of nowhere, and prowled towards the two girls, their intentions being evident.

Not that the girls were going to let them.

"Braixen, go!" As Serena tossed her pokeball forward, it opened, releasing her very first Pokemon. The moment she saw the foes in front of her, she immediately ignited her wand. "Braixen, Hidden Power!"

"Hagoop, Shockwave!" Lilia ordered.

Seemingly sensing their aggression, the Nuclear Pokemon charged forward, each letting out deranged growls and cries. Unfortunately, in their frenzied state they could only think in mindlessly pouncing on their enemies, and quickly fell prey to the barrage of rainbow colored orbs and homing electrical bolts.

"Well, a few less. There are still probably a lot of them," Lilia observed. She began to look around, as if assessing the situation. "This place is pretty big. What should we do next?"

"Maybe we should try to split up in order to cover more ground," Serena suggested. "Each floor is pretty big. Say, how about if I take the east wing, you take the west wing, and we work our way up to the highest floor?"

"Sounds like a plan. Come on Lopunny, Hagoop!" Lilia said, as she headed in the direction Serena had suggested. "Be careful! And don't forget to avoid the elevator! Use the stairs instead!"

"You too! Come on Braixen!" Serena said.

Trainer and Pokemon headed towards the east wing of the lobby. She hadn't spent that much time here, but she remembered some fast food restaurants there. While she found some Nuclear Pokemon wandering the area -which were quickly dispatched by her loyal starter- Serena didn't find anybody there. She deduced that, if there were people on the lowest floor when the Nuclear Pokemon invaded, they would have felt as soon as possible.

"Hello? Is there anybody there?" Serena asked.

"Brai, braixen!" her Pokemon cried as well.

But no human replied back, only Nuclear Pokemon that were drawn to her voice, which, in a way, filled her with hope that most people here had already left.

When Serena entered a fast food restaurant that specialized in spicy food, she saw a pair of Nuclear Owten eating something on the counter.

"Hey! Do you have money to pay for that?" Serena mock-asked.

"Ow! Owteeeen!" the Nuclear Owten screeched, before turning at Serena and Braixen, glaring at them with their eerie blank eyes.

"Braixen, Psybeam!"

As a pair of Owten dived at them, Braixen's eyes glowed with a swirl of multiple colors, before they fired an energy beam of the same colors. The Nuclear Owten went down before they were even able to get close to either trainer or Pokemon.

"Well done," Serena said, before she began to look around. "It seems that there are no more threats in this area. I can still hear yells and sounds of battle coming from above. Come on, let's go!"

Following Lilia's advice, Serena and Braixen took the stairs, and running as fast as they could, they climbed towards the first floor.

"They're breaking through!"

It didn't take them long to find somebody in need of help. Some people had taken shelter in a store and had barricaded the entrance. Some Nuclear Pokemon, a bunch of Tancoon that showed a worrying amount of persistence, were trying to take down the door by slamming against it repeatedly.

"Braixen, Flamethrower!"

The Fox Pokemon aimed her wand at the two unsuspecting Nuclear-types, before firing a stream of flames at them. The Tancoon had been so focused on the humans barricading themselves inside the store that they didn't notice the new enemy until they were engulfed

by the flames. High pitched cries and whines filled the air as the flames knocked them out.

"Huh? What's going on there?" the voice of a woman asked.

"Don't worry, it's fine now! My Pokemon knocked out those Nuclear Pokemon. The way to the exit is clear!" Serena assured.

"Are... are you serious?" a male voice asked.

"Completely serious! It's safe now!" Serena insisted. "Though, you better leave now, I don't know if more Nuclear Pokemon may come our way!"

Serena could hear some noises as people undid the barricade that blocked the store's door, before it opened a bit. The honey blonde saw a bald man fearfully peeking from the crack. Upon seeing Serena, he dared to open the door completely, and looked around. His eyes grew wide upon seeing the group of Nuclear Tancoon, unconscious and burnt.

"It's true! This girl has saved us!" the man cheered.

"Oh thank you! May the Twin Gods repay you for this!" a woman said.

"You can thank me later! Now I need you to leave!" Serena urged them.

Thankfully, they listened to her and exited the store, keeping a speedy pace but still looking around to see if there were anymore Nuclear Pokemon to worry about. Once they were finally out of sight, Serena and Braixen continued to search for more Nuclear Pokemon to neutralize, and most importantly, more people to save.

The people of the store were far from the only ones that needed some help. Next to a stand that sold coconut milk milkshakes she found a girl about a year or two older than Bonnie, shielding her little

brother with her body, while directing her Pokemon, an Owten, in a losing fight against a couple of Nuclear Chynmunk.

"Braixen, Hidden Power!"

The multicolored orbs struck the pair of Chipmunk Pokemon squaredly, and like the Tancoon before, they instantly fell before the power of the Kalosian Fire-type. The kids gasped upon the sudden intromission, but looked at Serena and Braixen with joy in their eyes.

"Come on, you need to leave here! Take the stairs down to the lobby! There shouldn't be any more Nuclear Pokemon there!" Serena directed them.

"T-thank you miss! Come on Rory! Owten, let's go!" the girl said, grabbing her little brother's hand and running away, her Pokemon flying behind.

Other people Serena helped were an old man being chased by a Nuclear Ekans, and a woman and her daughter being attacked by a trio of Nuclear Gligar. All of them fell quickly before Braixen's power.

"It doesn't look like there are anymore people in need of help here. Time to go to the next floor!" Serena declared.

Finding a set of stairs, the honey blonde and the Fox Pokemon climbed towards the next floor. Sadly, more yells, screams, cries, slams and crashing sounds could be heard, meaning that they were far from clear.

"HEEEEEEEEEELP!" a trio of young teenage girls screamed, as they were chased by a flock of Nuclear Owten.

"Braixen, Flamethrower!"

A well-aimed stream of fire managed to knock the Normal and Nuclear-type Pokemon out, saving the trio of teenagers.

"Get out of here, now! Go down the stairs, avoid the elevator!"
Serena told them.

The trio of girls, still trembling with terror, merely nodded and ran past her, towards the exit. Once they were out of sight, and presumably safe, Serena looked for her next target.

"Come on Braixen, we must-"

"SHAAAABAK!"

A loud hiss of an Arbok was followed by an equally loud crash of a glass cracking, as a Nuclear Arbok burst from a cloth store's store window, sending bits of glass and pieces of fabric everywhere, and slamming into Braixen, the Fox Pokemon clearly not expecting such a sudden attack, while Serena was knocked backwards.

"BRAAAAAAIX!" Braixen cried, as she was being launched sideways.

"Braixen!" Serena said, as she quickly tried to get up, wincing as some bits of glass dug into her skin. The honey blonde watched in horror how the Nuclear Arbok coiled its body around her oldest companion. She stumbled to grab another pokeball. "Selkid, help her!"

The pokeball opened, and from a burst of light, Serena's first Tandorian Pokemon emerged. Seeing what was going on, and the state her teammate was in, Selkid didn't wait for Serena's orders, and quickly prepared a Water Pulse between her small hands.

"Seeeeel-KID!"

The Sea Nymph Pokemon thrust her hands forward, shooting the orb of water at the Nuclear Pokemon, hitting it squarely without a single drop of water landing on Braixen. Arbok hissed in pain, loosening its hold on Braixen. The Fox Pokemon was able to slip her wand arm out and cast a small stream of flames at Arbok's face,

forcing the Cobra Pokemon to release her completely. Unfortunately, that wasn't enough for the Nuclear Pokemon to cease her attack, it instead caused the Arbok to switch tactics, as its tail was coated in a sickly purple glow before it slammed onto Braixen.

"B-Brai!" Braixen cried, as she reeled from the powerful Poison Tail.

"Ekans!" a new voice hissed from behind.

"Oh, what now?" Serena asked, turned around, and much to her horror, she saw a trio of Nuclear Ekans slithering towards her.

"S-Sel?" Selkid asked, looking back and forth between Serena and Braixen, almost wondering who to help.

Serena took that decision for her. "Help Braixen! Don't worry about me, I still have more Pokemon! Pancham-"

"Graveler, Thunderbolt! Vaporeon, Bubble Beam!" a new, feminine voice called.

"Grav!"

"Vapo!"

The three Ekans that were stalking towards Serena were zapped into unconsciousness by a powerful lightning bolt coming from a Pokemon that Serena identified as a Graveler, but didn't look like any Graveler she had seen before, this one having a more silvery look to its body, with some golden nuggets growing around it, as well as thick eyebrows made of jet black stone.

The Nuclear Arbok was also pelted by a barrage of explosive bubbles fired from the mouth of a nearby Vaporeon, which pushed it away from Braixen and Selkid, but it wasn't enough to knock it out. Of course, Serena could put an easy fix to that.

"Braixen, Fire Blast! Selkid, Hyper-voice!"

Braixen aimed her wand at the reeling Arbok, producing a massive torrent of flames that took the shape of a star as it flew towards the Cobra Pokemon, while Selkid let out a sonic scream from her mouth. Arbok was unable to dodge, and the two attacks found their mark, resulting in a large, noisy explosion. When the resulting smoke vanished the Nuclear Arbok laid there, lying against the ground, fainted.

Seeing that the danger was over for the time being, Serena allowed herself to sigh in relief, her two Pokemon doing the same.

"Hey, are you okay?" the same voice from before said.

Serena then realized that there was another girl, around the same age as the Moki twins, walking towards her, the Vaporeon and the weird looking Graveler walking behind her. A girl with dark skin and long hair styled in dreadlocks that Serena had already seen before, though this was the first time the two of them traded words.

"I could have been much worse if it wasn't for you, so thanks a lot there," Serena told her.

"No problem. You looked like you were in a pickle, so I lent you a hand," the girl said, smiling brightly. "By the way, my name is-"

"Leona," Serena interrupted her. Before the girl could ask how Serena knew her name, she added: "You won that raffle for the luxury cruise tickets."

"Oh, right, I did, didn't I?" she giggled.

"By the way, my name is Serena. Nice to meet you, and once again, thanks a lot for your help," Serena said. She was tempted to ask about that Graveler, but felt it wasn't the most appropriate time to do so.

"You're welcome. Though, what in the Tapus' name is going on here?" Leona said, waving her arms around the destruction no doubt

caused by the Nuclear Pokemon. "What are those weird looking Pokemon? Why are they so aggressive?"

"They're Nuclear Pokemon. They used to be normal Pokemon, but radiation exposure changed them into what they're now. And unfortunately, it wasn't only their bodies that got changed, their minds were also warped and twisted so much they can only feel rage and confusion," Serena explained.

"That... sounds pretty off the wall. How do you know that?" Leona asked.

"It's a pretty long story, one I'll be happy to share with you once we make sure everybody still in the mall can safely leave," Serena said.

"Understood," Leona said, willing to put the discussion on hold. She then turned towards her Pokemon. "Come on guys, let's help Serena evacuate the people here!"

Alongside her new unexpected ally, Serena continued her quest to clear her side of the department store of Nuclear Pokemon and help people in danger.

...

"Greninja, Night Slash!" Ash ordered.

"Geigeroach, Sludge Bomb!" Clemont followed.

"Gre!"

"Roach!"

Greninja delivered a wide swipe with a sword made of pure darkness, pushing backwards and knocking out of combat at the same time a Gligar, a Felunge and a Palih, while Geigeroach fired a glob of purple grime against a Nimflora, resulting in a blast of sludge that knocked it out as well.

"Our Pokemon... defeated so easily!" a Team Omega grunt lamented.

"How are these kids so powerful!" a female grunt said.

"Last warning. Surrender peacefully now. I don't want to hurt more Pokemon, even if they work for criminals like you, but Clemont and I will fight as many as necessary!" Ash stated.

"Pika!"

"Ninja!"

As some of the grunts returned their defeated Pokemon, the remaining ones debated over if fighting the two intruders, surrender, run away, or maybe something else.

"That's enough," a new voice said.

Everybody turned towards the direction of the new voice, as Alina and Anika, the Team Omega captains Ash and Clemont had seen at the abandoned plant, appeared from behind a large metal container.

"We can't even leave you alone for a second, can we?" Alina, the teal haired sister, said with a dramatic sigh.

"You shouldn't have your hopes high when it comes to these fuckwits," Anika, the maroon haired sister, replied. "We don't even pay them minimum wage, and I still think we're paying them too much."

"H-Hey... !" a grunt weakly protested.

"Ignore my dear sister's comments, people. You know we value how much you contribute to Team Omega," Alina said with her usual flair. She then looked at the pair of teenagers. "But I'm afraid that this job is a little too big for you. Anika and I will take care of them."

"You load the rest of the cargo onto the submarine, and depart once you're done," Anika said, as she tapped her eyepiece. The gadget beeped to life as numbers flashed on its screen. "HOLY FUCK! No wonder that Greninja was wiping the floor with our men! Check out these numbers!"

Alina mimicked her sister's actions, and scanned Greninja with her eyepiece. "Seven hundred. Way above average."

"You still think you can measure a Pokemon's power and potential with mere numbers?" Ash asked.

"Why yes, of course," Alina replied, as if it was an obvious question. "Not all Pokemon are equal, some are stronger than others, and those who dispute this fact are deluding themselves."

"That other Pokemon is pretty strong too, almost five hundred, and... is that a Nuclear Pokemon!?" Anika asked loudly. "How the fuck did you manage to make it obey you!?"

"We can wonder about that later, dear sister," Alina said, pulling out a pokeball. "Now, it's time for violence. To battle, Praseopunk!"

"Make it hurt, Neopunk!" Anika said, tossing a pokeball forward as well.

The two capture device opened at once, and from each of them emerged Pokemon with truly bizarre appearance: they both looked like ghosts, one of them green and the other pink, with what appeared to be pieces of a robot, mostly a chest and a head with a single visor for eye, inside them as if they were their skeletons.

The two of them also had a pair of metallic collars that didn't look like it was part of their bodies. Especially because said collars had a red Omega symbol on them.

"What kind of Pokemon are those?" Ash asked, quickly pulling out his Pokedex, hoping to get some information that would make the

battle easier.

" Praseopunk, the Twin Pokemon. Electric/Psychic. A mysterious life-form that emerged one day out of a computer. When it unites with its twin, its powers multiply in strength.

" Neopunk, the Twin Pokemon. Electric/Psychic. A highly intelligent Pokémon capable of traveling through cyberspace. Found in pairs alongside its twin, Praseopunk."

"So they are stronger when they are together..." Ash said, as he watched yellow sparks jumping back and forth between the Twin Pokemon.

"Ash, I know that ability! It's Plus and Minus!" Clemont said in realization.

"Very clever, four eyes," Anika cackled. "You better give up, brats. My sister and I are the greatest tag team in this sorry region! Broken Greninja or not, you have no chances against us!"

"Especially once we tip the scale in our favor even further by doing THIS!" Alina said, pulling out a remote and pressing a button.

"Personal Shield Generator, activate!"

The Omega symbols on the Twin Pokemon's collars began to glow as the gadgets hummed to life. An orange honeycomb barrier flashed for a second around the two Electric and Psychic-type Pokemon before vanishing, much to Ash and Clemont's concern.

"Another of your gadgets to 'improve' a Pokemon?" Ash asked. "Do you trust your Pokemon so little that you need to attach those trinkets to them?"

"We trust in nothing but absolute victory, you snot-nosed brat! Neopunk, Energy Ball!" Anika ordered.

"Praseopunk, Thunder Punch!" Alina followed.

Letting out a cry that sounded like a distorted song mixed with static, the pink Twin Pokemon formed an emerald glowing orb of power between its ghostly hands before launching it at Greninja, while its green counterpart curled one of its hands into a fist and coated it in yellow electricity as it dived towards Geigeroach.

"Greninja, parry that Energy Ball with Aerial Ace, then attack with Night Slash!"

"Geigeroach, Half-Life!" Clemont ordered.

Greninja dashed towards the incoming Grass-type missile, his arms shining white, and with an upwards swipe, the move was destroyed, bursting into thousand green sparkles. As the light from Greninja's arms disappeared, a sword of glowing purple power formed on his right hand, and went to strike the Twin Pokemon.

Meanwhile, Geigeroach's eyes began to shimmer with a bright green glow, as they fired a stream of glowing rings of the same color at the incoming attacker.

The sisters smirked, and soon Ash and Clemont found out why: the moment Geigeroach's attack reached Praseopunk, the same honeycomb orange barrier appeared around the Twin Pokemon, shielding it from the attack. The same thing happened to Neopunk, the energy barrier around it repelling Greninja's Night Slash, much to the frog's surprise.

"Energy Ball again, Neopunk!" Anika ordered.

As fast as it could, Neopunk let out a metallic screech before it formed another Energy Ball and launched it at Greninja, the Ninja Pokemon being wide open from the failed attack. This time, the orb of power connected, just as Praseopunk's electrified punch slammed into Geigeroach's face, sending both Pokemon reeling backwards.

"What the... why did our attacks not land?" Ash asked, as a mix of anger and confusion swirled inside him.

"What do you think, dumbass? That's thanks to the Personal Shield Generator!" Anika shouted. "As long as they're active, our Pokemon are untouchable!"

"It combines the power of Reflect and Light Screen, and multiplies them several times over," Alina continued the explanation. "And unlike the Muscular Enhancer, they have no effect on the wearer itself, so don't think you're going to defeat us the same way you defeated that idiot Zebos."

"One way or another, we will defeat you! There's no way we're going to let you harm anymore people or Pokemon! Greninja, Water Shuriken!" Ash ordered.

Greninja formed a four pointed star of water on each hand, before tossing them at both the Twin Pokemon. The sisters didn't issue any order, and their Pokemon made no attempt to move. The attacks landed, but the result was the same, the barriers blocking the attack.

"Didn't you hear us? No matter how much you attack, our Pokemon are in no danger of being hurt," Alina said, shaking her head. "Praseopunk, Instant Crush!"

The green Twin Pokemon held out a ghostly hand which began to glow with pink energy, and curled its fingers as if it was holding something between them. The same glow appeared around Geigeroach's neck, which was then lifted off the ground.

"Geigeroach!" Clemont cried.

"Gei! Geige! Gei!" the Radroach Pokemon buzzed, as it trashed wildly, trying to break the psychic hold. "Roach!"

Geigeroach fired a Sludge Bomb, but once again, it uselessly crashed against the protective shield, spreading it with grime that slowly dripped down the energy barrier.

"And Neopunk, Get Lucky!" Anika ordered.

The pink Twin Pokemon formed a glowing orb of energy of the same color between its hands, before thrusting them forward, releasing the energy in the form of a beam surrounded by faint yellow rings.

"Greninja, intercept it!" Ash ordered.

"Gre!"

In a fraction of a second, a blue blur dashed across the makeshift battlefield, and appeared between Geigeroach and Neopunk's attack, shielding the Bug and Nuclear Pokemon with his own body, which thankfully didn't suffer any harm thanks to his type immunity.

"Now, Night Slash on Praseopunk!"

This time, Greninja formed a sword of darkness on each hand, and dashed towards the green Twin Pokemon. Greninja delivered a series of slashes from many directions, vertical, diagonal, upwards, downwards... and none of them managed to bypass the frustratingly resistant barrier.

"Praseopunk, Thunder Punch!" Alina ordered.

The Electric and Psychic-type Pokemon canceled its telekinetic stranglehold on Geigeroach, much to the Radroach's Pokemon's relief, and curling its hand into an electricity coated fist, it delivered a brutal punch to Greninja's face, producing a blast of electricity when it connected, sending the Ninja Pokemon tumbling backwards.

"Greninja!" Ash cried. Growing increasingly frustrated with the course of the battle, he then crossed his arms in front of his chest. "Alright, if that's what you want, then let's go all out! Come on Greninja-"

"Ash, wait!" Clemont said, placing a hand on Ash's shoulder, interrupting the Pallet Town native from activating Battle Bond. "Even if Greninja becomes more powerful, I doubt we will be able to pierce those barriers. We already tried attacking them, and so far they don't even show signs of breaking."

"Then what do you suggest?" Ash replied.

"This isn't a battle that can be won with mere power. If direct attacks won't work, then we'll need to attack in a more indirect manner," Clemont asked. "Though, none of my Pokemon know moves like that..."

"Think all you want, it will be useless! Praseopunk, Dazzling Gleam!" Alina ordered.

"Neopunk, Discharge!" Anika shouted.

Praseopunk's green ghostly body began to shimmer with the colors of the rainbow, before releasing a barrage of energy blasts of the same color in a wide arc towards Greninja and Geigeroach. Its pink twin, meanwhile, coated itself in yellow electricity, before firing it in the form of a multitude of lightning bolts.

"Geigeroach, use Sludge Bomb around yourself!" Clemont ordered.

"Greninja, Double Team!" Ash ordered as well.

As multiple Greninja copies suddenly appeared around the pier, Geigeroach spat a torrent of purple grime in the form of a wave, as he spun around himself in order to create a makeshift shield that protected him from both the electric bolts and the rainbow colored energy blasts. The two attacks dispelled most of the illusory doppelgangers, but the real one was able to avoid being hit by them.

"Greninja, use... use..." Ash began, before trailing off.

Now it was time for a counterattack. But, what could they do? As much as he hated to admit it, those detestable women were right; nothing they could throw at them could ever make a dent on those energy barriers. He squeezed his brain for an answer. What else could he do that he hadn't done yet?

"Wait a minute..." Ash said, as he noticed that Prasepunk's shield was still visible, and had been since Geigeroach used that desperate Sludge Bomb. He could see some drops of purple grime on it.

Then, an idea dawned upon him. Greninja still knew another move Ash hadn't ordered him to use, a move Ash still needed to remind himself Greninja knew due how new it was. And while at first it might not look like anything different, the attack's additional effect might be able to give them some edge.

"Greninja, use Ice Beam!" Ash ordered.

"Ninja!" Greninja cried affirmatively, as he leapt on top of a nearby metal container, as an orb of freezing power formed between his webbed hands. Thrusting his hands downwards, the orb exploded into a bluish white beam that barreled towards Neopunk. And just before the attack could hit the pink Twin Pokemon, the Personal Shield Generator stopped the attack with an orange honeycomb barrier.

"No matter what you do, you won't be able to pierce our barriers! Just give up already!" Anika boasted.

"I'm afraid those two words aren't in my vocabulary!" Ash said, a smirk gracing his lips as his frustration slowly faded away into confidence and resolution.

As Greninja kept channeling the attack, frost and ice began to spread around the shield, quickly encasing Neopunk inside a sphere of solid ice.

"What... what the actual fuck!?" the maroon haired sister yelled.

"Good idea, Ash! Maybe we can't harm them directly, but they won't be able to fight if it's encased inside a block of ice!" Clemont said, jubilant.

"Praseopunk, quickly, break that ice with Thunder Punch!" Alina urged.

"Not so fast! Geigeroach, Sludge Bomb on Prasepunk! Rapid fire!" Clemont roared.

"Geigeeeeeeee-roach roach roach roach!" Geigeroach buzzed as he began to fire a barrage of globs of purple sludge at Praseopunk.

As the globes impacted on the shield, they exploded and covered it in purple slime. And just like Neopunk was encased inside a hollow sphere of ice, its twin was covered by a small mountain of purple grime.

"Turns out your precious shield generator isn't as flawless as you thought!" Clemont said, smirking as he adjusted his glasses. "We might not be able to harm your Pokemon, but we can stop them from doing anything at all!"

"Oh, I'm SO going to wipe those damned smiles off of your faces!" Anika roared, as she grabbed another pokeball.

However, before she could call for another Pokemon, the sound of water roaring drew the attention of the battlers, and saw how Team Omega's submarine began to submerge into the sea. This caused the two sisters to smirk at the two teens.

"Well, look at that. We might not have beaten you, but we accomplished our goal. A cargo of Nuclear Pokemon is heading towards our secret base," Alina said, smirking smugly.

"Yeah, and they forgot to pick you up! I hope you enjoy spending some time inside a cell under the Ranger HQ, because that's where you two are going," Clemont said.

"Oh, I don't think so," Alina said, pulling out another pokeball.

"Gardevoir, use Teleport! Bring us to the submarine!"

"No!" Ash cried.

As soon as the Embrace Pokemon came out of the pokeball, its body began to glow with a pink shimmer. An outline of the same color appeared around the two sisters and their Pokemon, before disappearing in a flash.

"No!" Ash repeated, as he ran towards the edge of the pier in a futile attempt to catch them. He could see some ripples in the water, no doubt a product of the submarine moving away. "Dammit!"

"Piika..." Pikachu said, as he rubbed Ash's hair with a paw.

"It's okay, Pikachu. I was hoping we'd be able to get them this time..." Ash said, bitterly remembering how Zebos had gotten away.

"From what you've told me, you still managed to stop them from catching quite a few Nuclear Pokemon," Clemont said, as he placed a hand on Ash's shoulder. "Come on, there's nothing more to do here. I'm sure there are still some other Nuclear Pokemon attacking innocent people."

Ash nodded. "Alright. Let's go."

...

Eventually, thanks to Ash and his friends' efforts, alongside the Rangers and other trainers in the city, all Nuclear Pokemon were either knocked out and captured, or driven away from the city. Many Team Omega grunts were also arrested by the Rangers.

While the damage done to the city was considerable, it was still nowhere near enough the destruction caused to Lumiose City by Team Flare's mad plan a few months back, and water and electricity were still functional. Even if it was estimated that repairs would take between one or two months, at least the citizens' lives wouldn't be affected much in the meantime.

Once the city-wide battle was over and the Rangers declared that no more Nuclear Pokemon had been seen causing trouble, the very first thing Ash and his friends did was head towards a Pokemon Center, given that even if not all their Pokemon were hurt, they were all beyond exhausted due the constant battling. Needless to say, it was pretty crowded with people whose Pokemon had been harmed during the attack. Ash heard somebody saying how other Nurse Joys from nearby cities were already on their way to Bealbeach in order to alleviate the bigger than normal workload.

While they waited for their Pokemon to be restored to full health, Ash and his friends, Lilia included, were having something to eat at the Center's cafeteria, which as expected, was much more crowded than usual.

"So, Team Omega was catching those Nuclear Pokemon?" Serena asked, before frowning. "I knew they were behind all this mess."

"Though... if they were truly behind this, why did they release those Pokemon into the city, only to catch them back?" Lilia asked, as she took a bite from the omelet she was eating. "It doesn't make much sense."

"It doesn't. When Ash and I faced them, they were quite in a hurry to leave with their loot," Clemont pointed out.

"I have the feeling that we're missing something..." Ash sighed. Pikachu patted him on the shoulder.

"More than mere 'something'," Lilia punctualized. "This attack was nothing like the one at the power plant at the island."

"What do you mean?" Bonnie asked.

"On the island, the Nuclear Pokemon attacked like a coordinated, organized force. They worked with each other, and it looked like they had a strategy and a goal."

"That doesn't sound like the Nuclear Pokemon we fought on the island either," Ash intervened. "They just attacked us directly all at once, in complete disarray."

"And the Pokemon we fought here weren't that much different from those either. It seemed that their goal was to cause mindless destruction," Serena added.

"I know. That's why the attack on the nuclear plant felt so weird in retrospect," Clemont said, as he adjusted his glasses. "It almost felt like those Pokemon were being directed by an unseen force that compelled them to act as a unit."

Before anybody could say anything else, Lilia's pokegear began to beep. Looking at the caller ID, the bespectacled girl frowned a little.

"It's my dad. Excuse me," Lilia said, as she got up and went to find a place with less background noise to answer the call.

Upon seeing Lilia go, Ash said: "You know, seeing that, I feel like we should call our parents too to let them know we're okay. Stuff like this is bound to be in the news."

"Cha," Pikachu nodded in agreement.

"Let's do it once we have eaten and gotten our Pokemon back," Serena suggested, to everybody's approval.

Silence followed that statement, as the group focused on their food. Then, Bonnie spoke up.

"Sooooo... what are we going to do now?" the young girl asked.

"What do you mean, Bonnie?" Clemont asked.

"Isn't it obvious? Ash still has his Gym battles and Serena has to do more contests. We aren't going to stay here, are we?" Bonnie asked.

"Bonnie's right. Aside from what she said, we'd only get in the way of the reconstruction efforts," Serena agreed. "Though, now that you mention it, I don't have much of an idea of where we could go next. Bealbeach City is a bit far away from other towns and cities in Tandor."

"By the way, what about you, Clemont?" Ash asked. "What are you going to do now, now that the... well, now that you can no longer go to the power plant," Ash asked, trying to sound as least insensitive as possible.

"Clemont can go back to travel with you, if that's what he wishes to do," it was Lilia who replied, as she walked towards the group's table. She looked upset, her lips were pressed into a thin line.

"You're back? That was fast," Clemont noted.

The bespectacled girl nodded. "Yes. Dad said he wants me to meet him at home when possible. To see if I'm alright, but also so I can tell him what happened at the plant. So I guess I'll have to leave Tandor. Needless to say, the project has been canceled for the time being. All the workers have been laid out, Clemont included. Of course, they will all get a compensation for the troubles."

"I'm really sorry to hear that," Serena said.

"It can't be helped," Lilia sighed. "Though, I'm not going to let this go, at least not without getting to the bottom of the matter, and I imagine that my dad will think likewise, after all the money he invested in this project."

That moment, Nurse Joy's voice announced through the intercom that Ash and his friends' Pokemon had been restored to full health. After they finished their meals, they headed to the lobby.

...

"Here are your Pokemon," the blue haired Nurse Joy said, as she, her Aromatisse and her Miasmedic carried trays with pokeballs on them.

"Thanks a lot, Nurse Joy!" Ash said, as he picked up his pokeballs, his friends were doing the same.

"Sylveon, come out!" Serena said, which caused the others to stare at her. She was quick to explain. "Sylveon got beat up pretty badly while fighting a Nuclear Pokemon, so I want to make sure she's alright."

"Syl!" Sylveon cried happily.

And indeed, the Intertwining Pokemon looked fine, as if the beatdown at the proverbial hands of that Nuclear Gyarados never happened. Serena crouched down, and scratched her Pokemon under her chin, a gesture the Fairy-type welcomed.

"Well, you look pretty good, don't you?" Serena smiled.

"Syl, sylveon!"

That moment, one of Clemont's pokeballs opened on its own, and from a burst of light, Nucleon emerged.

"Nu, cleon!" Nucleon cried happily upon seeing his crush.

"Uh, what Pokemon is that?" Ash asked.

Before anybody could answer, Nucleon walked towards Sylveon, and tried to touch her with his paw.

"SYLLLLLLLLL!"

However, Sylveon's demeanor changed radically, going from happy to absolutely terrified, and quickly hid from Nucleon behind Serena's legs.

"Nu?" Nucleon asked, sounding confused and a little hurt.

"Sylveon? What's wrong?" Serena asked. "That's Clemont's Eevee, who evolved into Nucleon. Can't you tell it's him?"

"Nu...?" Nucleon tried to get closer to Sylveon, but Sylveon screamed again and tried to slap Nucleon with her feelers, making the Atomic Pokemon flinch. "Nu, nucleon?"

"Why is Sylveon so terrified of Nucleon?" Ash asked.

"I think I have a hypothesis," the inventor said, placing a hand under his chin. "Remember how Ash's Goodra, back when he was a Goomy, was terrified of Dedenne and other Fairy-types because of that Florges?"

"Are you saying that that beating caused Sylveon to develop a fear of Nuclear-types, Nucleon included?" Serena asked.

Whenever Nucleon tried to get close to Sylveon, the Intertwining Pokemon would either step back, or try to swat him away with her feelers.

"I'm afraid so, given the evidence," Clemont said.

"Nuuuu..." Nucleon whined, lowering his head as he walked away from Sylveon, who relaxed a little now that the Atomic Pokemon wasn't near her.

"Poor Nucleon... he liked Sylveon so much..." Bonnie lamented.

"Nene," Dedenne agreed, remembering his own experience with Goomy.

"Hey, don't worry, Goodra was also afraid of Fairy-types, and in the end he managed to overcome that fear and befriended Dedenne!" Ash reminded everybody. "It might take some time, but I'm sure Sylveon won't be afraid of Nuclear-types forever."

That moment, the automatic doors of the Pokemon Center swished open, and Kellyn entered the building, followed by Cameron. The normally stoic Ranger smiled a little upon seeing Ash and his friends.

"I figured I'd find you here," Kellyn said, as he walked towards the group.

"Oh hey, Kellyn!" Ash greeted the Head Ranger. "So, how's everything? No more Nuclear Pokemon, right?"

"It doesn't seem to be the case. The Nuclear Pokemon we didn't manage to catch seem to have run away," it was Cameron who answered. "The Ranger's Science Division are now studying them in order to see what we can learn about them, and hopefully, see how we can turn them back to normal."

"Let's hope they succeed," Clemont said.

"I have utmost faith that our scientists will do their best," Kellyn nodded. "Though, that's not why I am here," he looked at Serena and Lilia. "I was told how these two young ladies helped protect the people at the department store and fought many of the Pokemon there," then he motioned towards Ash and Clemont, "while these two young men were able to disrupt an operation carried by Team Omega, taking advantage of all the chaos going on."

"Not as good as we hoped, given that many of them managed to get away," Ash lamented.

"Pika..."

"Hey, nobody expects you to dismantle the whole organization single handedly, so don't beat yourself up so badly, kid," Cameron reassured Ash. "The Rangers were able to arrest many members that were previously defeated by you, so you did the city a great service."

"Thank you, sir," the boy from Pallet replied.

"Anyway, I came here to give you your just reward for helping this city so much during its direst time," Kellyn said, as he pulled something out of his pocket. "I'm pretty sure you saw the huge luxury cruise docked at the port, right?"

Serena nodded. "I entered a raffle to win a pair of tickets, but no luck."

"In that case, you're going to enjoy this," Kellyn said, as he handed something to Ash.

The teen boy opened his eyes wide upon seeing the object, but it was nothing compared to Serena's reaction.

"Oh my goodness! Tickets for the cruise!" she screamed a bit too loudly, causing some people to look in their direction.

"... three, four, five?" Bonnie counted. "There's one for me too? But I didn't do anything during the attack!"

"Well, of course, it's not that I'd expect your friends and brother to leave you on land while they go on a cruise, right?" Kellyn said, smiling at her. "Plus, I know that, were you a few years older, you and your Pokemon would have fought just as hard as your friends."

"You got that right!" Bonnie replied, puffing her chest.

"Thanks a lot for this!" Ash earnestly said.

"Like I said, a reward for a job well done," Kellyn said. "Plus, between this and what happened at the power plant, I felt that you needed some time to relax and have some fun."

"The cruise will also hold a contest. I think one of you is a coordinator, right?" Cameron asked.

"Yeah, that would be me," Serena replied.

"Heh, we get to enjoy a cruise and Serena gets to win her fourth ribbon! Awesome!" Ash cheered, pumping a fist.

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu cheered as well.

"I better call my dad to tell him this. Hopefully he'll agree I also need some time to unwind and relax before we can meet," Lilia said, as he went to find a quieter place to call her father.

"The cruise will set sail tomorrow morning, and will last three days," Cameron told them. "Hope you enjoy it."

"You can bet we will!" Bonnie said.

...

Once the tickets were delivered, Kellyn and Cameron left Ash and their friends to their joy, and left the Pokemon Center. The two men started to walk through the empty streets of the normally bustling city, as the sun set in the horizon, the orange gleam of twilight reflecting on the glass of the tall skyscrapers.

"It's lucky those kids were here, right?" Cameron asked. "Based on what I heard, the damage to the city would have been much greater if it wasn't for them. Not to mention those Team Omega goons we managed to catch."

"Lucky indeed," Kellyn said. "You know my kids could have been here had they delayed their journey a day. On one hand, we could have used their help, given that they're growing into skilled trainers. But on the other hand..."

"You're glad that they weren't here, where they would be in danger," Cameron finished what the Head Ranger was about to say. "Don't feel too bad about it, man. I'm a father too, and I'm happy as hell that Theo also left this city before all this shit happened. Plus, your kids already got a good dose of horror with what happened on the abandoned plant."

"You were right. I shouldn't have sent them there," Kellyn admitted.

Cameron sighed, and placed his hands on his pockets. "No point in mulling it over. What's done is done."

Kellyn had nothing to say to that. The two of them continued to walk in silence. That's it, until Cameron spoke again.

"Do you know this isn't the end, right?" Cameron asked.

"What do you mean?" the Head Ranger asked. "Do you think there will be more attacks?"

"I'm sure of it. This one felt kind of random and disorganized, but you have seen the way the Nuclear Pokemon attacked the power plant. No wild Pokemon ever behaved the way they did. Kellyn, someone or something was controlling them. And whatever it was, it wanted the power plant."

"If that's the case, the other plants might be in danger," Kellyn reasoned. "I'll tell all our Rangers across the region to keep their eyes peeled."

"Indeed. We need to uncover what caused this. If it's Team Omega, or something else," Cameron stated. "I'm going to investigate the cause behind all of this madness. You might not hear from me in a while, Kellyn."

"Understood. Make sure to be careful, Cameron. Remember that you have a son," Kellyn told him.

Cameron smiled softly. "Don't worry. I don't plan to turn Theo into an orphan."

No more words were exchanged after that, the two men going their separate ways. Kellyn went back to the Rangers HQ, Cameron to wherever fate would lead him.

Author's Note: Whew, that was quite the lengthy and action-packed chapter, but it's finally done!

Following Ash's Orchynx evolving into Metalynx, we have two more evolutions here: Lilia's Buneary evolving into Lopunny and Clemont's Eevee evolving into Nucleon. The last one should have been obvious if you played the game, doubly so after Clemont got Geigeroach (the requirement for Eevee to evolve into Nucleon is to level up past level 20 with a Nuclear Pokemon in your party. With all that fighting, it wasn't rare that Eevee "leveled up", so to speak). Too bad for Nucleon Sylveon now is afraid of him, thanks to the beating she took from that Nuclear Gyarados :(

We saw a little of her in the previous chapter, but now we could see Leona, the fourth and last of Serena's contest rivals, in action, as well as two of her Pokemon. And you'll see even more of her once the next contest arrives.

Last time they got interrupted before they could get their hands dirty, but at last we can see now Alina and Anika in action. Not only are they more careful and less boastful than Zebos, but use a gadget to enhance their Pokemon that doesn't hurt them in the long run as it was the case with the Muscular Enhancer. Still, the Personal Shield Generator isn't perfect, as Ash showed them. Also, someone pointed out that given that they're twins, Praseopunk and Neopunk would fit Alina and Anika pretty well, and as you can see, I already thought that as well ;)

And if the previous chapter didn't make it obvious, Clemont is officially back on the group. Though if you played the game, you already guessed that his new job wasn't going to last long.

Many of you were quite surprised that Serena lost the ticket raffle, and believed that she wouldn't go on the cruise. As you can see, turns out she and her friends are going to the cruise after all! You were right in that I wouldn't have made a big deal out of a contest with a special judge taking place on the cruise

if I didn't plan for Serena to take part in it. I came up with the raffle idea as a way to misdirect you while introducing Leona. The plan was always for Kellyn to give Ash and co. the tickets for the cruise, just like in the game (though, in the game the city is overrun and you're given the tickets as a way to escape from the Nuclear Horde; going on a cruise ship after a big city was invaded by an army of Nuclear Pokemon felt extremely jarring, so I changed it to make the mood change smoother).

And thus, next time we begin the Tandor Luxury Cruise three parter! I've been dying to get to this part, so I'm very excited to finally be here. And so will you, given that something you guys have been waiting for will finally happen ;)

Thanks to Fox McCloude, Guest #1, cricketlaxwolvesbandy, 61394, MegaSalamence64, hirowriter, berb12335435 and for reviewing last chapter, and special thanks to Viroro-kun for his amazing job as a betareader, whose edits and suggestions made this chapter so much better.

I better end this note here before it gets any longer. See you next time on the luxury cruise, and don't forget to drop a review!

Luxury Cruise I: Rivalries

Author's Note: And we passed 200 reviews! Shout out to Brightnova169 for posting review #200!

Chapter 29:

Luxury Cruise I: Rivalries

Tandor Luxury Cruise

"Oh boy, oh boy, I can't believe it! This is a dream come true!" Serena almost squealed.

The group had to wait for quite a big line in order to get on the ship, but after almost an hour, they were finally allowed to climb the stairs that would lead them into the ship. While the mood was overall pretty upbeat, Serena was so giddy, she couldn't even stay still.

"You don't need to tell us," Ash laughed.

"Yes. I don't ever remember seeing you so excited," Clemont pointed out.

"What can I say? I always wanted to go on a cruise, but I never thought I would since they're so expensive..." Serena began.

"Have you gone on a cruise, Lilia?" Ash asked. The "since your family is so wealthy" was left unsaid, but not unheard.

"Not really," the bespectacled girl said. "Then again, we do have a yacht, so I didn't feel the need. Still, I think it will be quite a pleasant experience."

Thankfully for the taller girl, her father allowed her to go on the cruise with Ash and his friends. Her yacht would be waiting for her at the

port on Route 8, where the cruise would end its voyage, which would take her back home. Though, in the meantime, she'd enjoy the time she still had with Clemont and the others.

"And after the mess with the Nuclear Pokemon, this is going to feel even better," Serena said, as she and the others finally entered the ship. "What about the rest of you, guys? Ever been on a cruise before?"

Both Clemont and Bonnie shook their heads, while Ash said: "Yeah. Twice, in fact."

"Twice?" Serena repeated.

"Heh, why am I not surprised? It seems like there's nothing Ash hasn't done," Bonnie said.

"Though, I don't know if the first one counts. I was barely there for a day before the ship sunk," Ash said way too nonchalantly.

"It... sunk?" Clemont asked, a little worried.

"Yeah. Team Rocket -the whole organization, not just Jessie, James and Meowth- attacked the ship and tried to steal all the passengers' Pokemon. There was a battle, one thing led to another, and... the ship went down," Ash recounted.

"Pi, pika," Pikachu said, nodding.

"And the second cruise?" Clemont asked.

"It was shortly after the Unova League. I was planning to return to Kanto, and Professor Juniper told me to take this cruise that went through the Decolore Islands," Ash explained, and seeing the somewhat worried looks the others were shooting at him, he added: "This one didn't sink, if that's what you're thinking."

"Good to hear it's not a common occurrence, then," Serena chuckled a little awkwardly.

Clemont nodded in agreement. "Yeah, just because it happened once doesn't mean it's going to happen again. In fact, the chance of a cruise sinking or suffering a similar incident are-"

"Big brother," Bonnie interrupted him in a tone that made it sound like she was the older sibling, as she stared at the inventor with exasperated eyes. "Do NOT finish that sentence."

...

Once inside the ship, a crewmember led them to their cabins. Every member of the group had one, including Bonnie, and they each had two rooms: a large bedroom with a bed, a TV mounted on a wall, a loveseat and a pair of couches and a table with a pair of chairs, and a bathroom. The bedroom also had a large porthole from where the sea could be seen.

Once they checked their cabins and left all their belongings there, and went to the main deck where they were told many trainers were gathering, many of them coordinators preparing for the contest the next day.

"Maybe it would be good for you to go there and scout the competition," Ash suggested. "Maybe even train a little."

"And you aren't suggesting that because you don't want to get into a battle yourself, are you?" Bonnie asked, raising a thin eyebrow as her mouth curved into a smug grin.

"Well, I'd lie if I said I'm not interested in myself, hehe..." Ash sheepishly admitted, as he rubbed the back of his head.

"Pikaaa..." Pikachu shook his head.

"It's okay, Ash. I wanted to go to the upper decks to sunbathe a little, but it's a little chilly for that right now," Serena began, reassuring him. "So I'm okay going to the main deck. What about the rest of you?"

"Sure, I don't mind doing either one thing or the other," Clemont said.

"I'm okay with your plan," Lilia agreed.

"As long as we get to see lots of cute Pokemon," Bonnie said.

With that decision made, the group headed towards the main deck. Once there, they were greeted by a large crowd spread among the vast area. Many people were also gathered around small battlegrounds, where several trainers fought against each other. Ash's eyes lit up as if he was a little kid in a recently opened toy store.

"Whoa, look at all those matches going on! Wish I could see all of them!" Ash giddily shouted.

Deciding to just let Ash enjoy himself, the rest of the group followed the excited team along the many battlefields. Still, Serena made sure to take a look at some of the battles going on, and while some were done by trainers, the fighting style used by the Pokemon there told her that their trainers were coordinators.

" Hmmm... perhaps it wouldn't be a bad idea to train a little for tomorrow's contest..." the honey blonde thought.

"Volchik, Shockwave!"

Her thoughts were interrupted as a familiar voice rose over the noise of the multitude. A voice Serena hadn't heard in quite some time, but one that she wouldn't forget so easily.

"Serena?" Clemont asked. "Are you okay? You look like you just saw a ghost."

Serena ignored Clemont and at a brisk pace, walked towards one of the nearby battlegrounds, one where the voice came from, much to the others' confusion.

"Serena, where are you going?" Ash asked, following her.

"Use Shockwave again, Volchik!" the familiar voice ordered.

"Swabone, block it with Shadow Claw!" another trainer said.

There, fighting against a boy a little older than her, was Sayaka. Her face was frozen into a visage of grim determination as she lead her Pokemon, a plump bird with dark blue feathers, light gray wings, a collar of dark gray feathers around its neck, a tail of the same color that looked as if it was made of storm clouds, and a weird yellow head shaped like a thick lightning bolt.

It was fighting against a Pokemon that reminded Serena of a Cubone, except this one had dark purple skin, had a red bandana around its neck, its left arm was skeletal and its right arm was missing a hand, and a hook in its place. It didn't appear to be doing very well against Sayaka's Volchik.

"Hey, isn't that...?" Bonnie began.

"Sayaka," Serena confirmed.

Of course Sayaka would be here. If the honey blonde remembered correctly, Sayaka came from a wealthy family, and given that there would be a contest held within the ship, she obviously wouldn't miss it.

"Do you guys know that girl?" Lilia asked.

Clemont nodded. "Sayaka is a coordinator we met on Serena's first contest. She beat Serena in the finals. She... Well, she isn't exactly a very nice individual."

"She's a stuck up jerk full of herself that can't stop being mean for five seconds," Bonnie amended, angrily crossing her arms.

"It seems she has a new Pokemon," Ash said, as he pulled out his Pokedex. "Or at least, a Pokemon we have never seen her using before."

" Volchik, the Storm Chick Pokemon. Electric/Flying. They gather together during thunderstorms. Their chirping sounds like static electricity." the Pokedex explained.

"Let's finish this with Dragon Rage!" Sayaka ordered.

Volchik opened its beak, and a torrent of fuchsia and dark blue flames poured from it which washed over its unfortunate enemy.

"Swabone, no!" her opponent, a boy slightly older than her, cried.

Once the flames disappeared, Volchik's opponent, Swabone, laid there motionless. Ash and Serena quickly scanned it before its crestfallen trainer could recall it.

" Swabone, the Swab Pokemon. Ghost/Fighting. A favorite Pokémon of pirates. The bandanna it wears indicates which ship's crew it belongs to. It craves treasure and will hoard any gold and jewels it finds." the Pokedex droned.

"Great job, Volchik. Of course, not that such an unworthy adversary pushed you to fight at your best," Sayaka gloated, much to the disapproval of her defeated opponent and most of the people gathered there. The ninja didn't flinch, if anything she seemed to revel in the scorn that was thrown her way. "Do any of you sad attempts at Pokemon trainers have what it takes to battle against me?"

"Oh, I'm going to shut her up right now!" Serena said, as she stomped towards the battleground.

"Wait a minute, don't-" Lilia tried to stop her, but to no avail.

"Yeah, I will battle against you!" Serena loudly declared.

Dozens of pairs of eyes turned at her as she walked towards the battleground. Sayaka's eyes were wide open, as if she wasn't expecting Serena to be here. However, her surprise was short lived,

as smugness made a quick return to the ninja's face, looking as if the holidays came much earlier this year. A look that gave Serena chills. She was now starting to regret letting her rival bait her like that, but sadly, there was no turning back now.

"Well, well, well... Do my eyes deceive me? If it's the Kalosian peasant!" Sayaka laughed. "It's been a while, hasn't it? I have to admit, I wasn't expecting to find you here of all places, but fate sometimes has a strange sense of humor."

Sayaka's insults did an admirable job reigniting the honey blonde's inner fire. "First of all, the name's Serena. And I'm about to give you the attitude adjustment you've been asking for since we met at Kevlar town!"

"Yeah!"

"Well said!"

"You go, girl!"

"Teach her some humility!"

The onlookers cheering her strengthened her resolve. The voice that tried to warn her not to take the bait was now a forgotten echo in the distance. This. This was what she was meant to do. To put smiles on people's faces. To make people happy. And she would do so by, ironically, wiping out a smile from Sayaka's smug face.

"Look like you got the people's support. Which would mean something if the winner of a match was decided through a popularity contest," Sayaka taunted. "My Volchik has been fighting for quite some time now, but it's still fresh enough to beat whatever Pokemon you send against us. So pick a Pokemon and humiliate yourself in front of the crowd losing against me again."

"Very well!" Serena said, angrily taking out a pokeball. "Selkid, go!"

The pokeball opened after it hit the ground, and the Sea Nymph Pokemon emerged from a burst of light.

"Sel, selkid!" she cried, as she prepared for battle.

Sayaka snorted dismissively. "Seriously? You're going to use a Water-type against an Electric-type? I knew you were a subpar trainer, but I thought that at least you'd understand something as basic as type matchups."

"Type matchups aren't everything! Selkid is strong enough to beat your Pokemon," Serena stated.

"Selkid!" her Pokemon agreed.

"Dear, I'm going to show you the sheer foolishness of deliberately putting yourself at a disadvantage against a superior opponent," Sayaka boasted, while crossing her arms. "I'll be gracious enough to let you attack first."

~Serena (Selkid) VS Sayaka (Volchik)~

"Very well! Selkid, use Hyper-voice!" Serena commanded.

"Sel-KIIIIIIIIID!"

Selkid opened her mouth, letting out a stream of sonic waves that rippled towards the Storm Chick Pokemon. Sayaka didn't look worried in the slightest.

"Counter it with Dragon Rage!" Sayaka ordered.

"Vol, vol!" it chirped, before taking a deep breath. "CHIIIIIIIIK!"

Volchik opened its beak, releasing a torrent of swirling blue and fuchsia flames. The wall of fire crashed against the sonic blast, both attacks canceling each other out in the ensuing explosion.

"Don't give it time to rest, Selkid! Time for Water Pulse!" Serena ordered.

"Sel!" Selkid cried, as she brought her hands together, forming a large orb of water between them before pushing it outwards, sending the liquid orb towards Volchik like a missile.

"Volchik, parry it with Aerial Ace!" Sayaka ordered.

"Vok, chik!" Volchik chirped as it dashed towards the coming orb of water. The Storm Chick Pokemon's wings gleamed with a white shine before delivering a cross-shaped chop at the watery missile, bursting it into thousands of water droplets.

"Good job, Volchik! Now, Discharge!" Sayaka ordered.

"Chik, chiiiiik!" Volchik continued to chirp, its body crackling with blue sparks as it built up electricity. Once it was fully charged, it released the electricity in the form of a wave of electricity that traveled towards Selkid.

"Selkid, Ice Beam on the ground in front of you!" Serena replied.

"Seeeeeee!" Selkid opened her mouth, forming an orb of freezing power in front of it, before firing a bluish-white beam towards a spot on the ground, quickly creating a large iceberg in front of her. The incoming lightning bolts crashed against the block of ice, unable to reach Selkid.

"Now, Hyper-voice again!" Serena ordered.

"Seeeeeee-KIIIIIIIIID!" Selkid let out a powerful sonic scream that not only shattered the block of ice in front of her into a thousand shards, the force of the soundwaves sent said shards flying towards Sayaka's Pokemon.

"Chik, chik, chiiiiik!" Volchik cried in pain as not only was it blasted by a powerful sonic blast, but also pelted by a multitude of razor ice

shards.

"Volchik, stand firm!" Sayaka commanded her Pokemon.

"Ha! How does it feel to be beaten by a peasant, huh?" Serena asked.

...

"Whoa! Such a great combination move!" Ash gushed. "Using a barrier of ice as a shield against electricity, then reusing the ice alongside Hyper-voice!"

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu cheered as well.

"Yeah! If this was a real contest, that would have taken a lot of points out of Sayaka," Bonnie pointed out.

"Serena might win this if she keeps up this pace going," Clemont said.

"She might, yes, but I'm not so sure," Lilia said, crossing her arms, her eyes fixed on the match.

"Oh, come on! Don't be such a downer!" Bonnie protested. "Serena has this in the bag!"

"Huh? What do you mean, Lilia?" Clemont asked.

"That girl, Sayaka... from what little I've seen, she loves to both boast and taunt her opponents before a battle and to kick them while they're down after beating them. And she appears to have the skill to back her boasts up," Lilia began. "Serena agreed to battle her clearly affected by her words, and she seems to be running on anger rather than skill. She wants to prove Sayaka wrong at all costs."

Ash weighed in Lilia's words, before directing his eyes towards Serena. The honey blonde's mouth was pressed into a thin line, her brow heavily furrowed, her body completely tensed. She appeared to

be focused on the match alone, and in Ash's experience that was good. It would only be a problem the moment Serena's focus shifted from the Pokemon to her opponent.

"Come on Serena, keep going! You're doing great!" Ash cheered, hoping for his words to put her in a better state of mind.

...

"You think you're so good, just because you managed to land a couple of lucky hits? Ha!" Sayaka laughed mirthlessly. "Let me show you how wide the gap in skill and power is between you and me! Volchik, Rain Dance!"

"Chiiii... !" the Storm Chick chirped, as a blue glowing outline surrounded its body.

Gray storm clouds began to form above the battlefield, quickly followed by a shower of raindrops. People began to move back from the battlefield in order not to get drenched.

"Is that girl dumb?"

"Using Rain Dance against a Water-type Pokemon... !"

"What is she trying to do...?"

In another situation, Serena would have thought the same. However, more than a year of traveling with Ash, as well as witnessing and taking part in many battles had honed Serena's strategic mind, and she could easily see what the ninja girl was planning to do.

"I've seen this before, in the battle between Sawyer and Tierno. I might have been genuinely confused by any other Pokemon, but Volchik is part Electric-type. You plan to use the weather for a perfectly accurate Thunder, don't you? Oh well, let's make you think I don't know what you're about to do," Serena smirked confidently.

"That was a big mistake, setting heavy rain that benefits my

Pokemon but does nothing for yours! Selkid, make her realize that with a Water Pulse!"

"Sееееel... !" Selkid once again formed an orb of water between her hands, this one being noticeably larger than her previous attempts, yet it took Selkid no more effort than usual to launch it at her foe.

"Stop it with Dragon Rage, Volchik!" Sayaka ordered.

"Vooooool... !" Volchik took a deep breath, before opening its large beak and releasing a bright torrent of blue and fuchsia flames.

The Water Pulse tore through the wall of fire, losing size and momentum as it did, but in the end it managed to overcome the Dragon-type attack and smacked against Volchik, the orb exploding upon contact, knocking it backwards and leaving it even more drenched. Still, there was still plenty of fight in it, as it jumped back to its feet and shook the excess water from its feathers.

"You think I was stupid setting up this rain, but once again you fail to see more than one step ahead," Sayaka said, as she prepared her move. "And now you're going to pay the price for your shortsightedness! Volchik, Thunder! Fry that fish!"

"Vooooool-CHIK!" Volchik's body crackled with blue electricity, before sending it upwards in the form of a thick lightning bolt.

Serena, however, wasn't worried. "Heh, I knew you were going to do that! Selkid, Hyper-voice upwards!"

"SееееееelKIIIIIIID!" Selkid screamed into the sky, releasing a powerful sonic blast just as a blinding yellow lightning bolt descended from the clouds above her with a thunderclap.

The two attacks clashed, the soundwaves successfully blocking the Thunder, splitting it in smaller electric streams that hit several spots around Selkid, but none close to her.

"What the...?" Sayaka asked.

"Are you surprised it didn't work? What, you thought that I didn't know what you were doing with that Rain Dance? That I haven't seen other people use that tactic before?" Serena asked, the fire within her roaring loudly, unperturbed by the droplets pelting her body.

Sayaka sneered, clearly frustrated that her clever combo hadn't paid off. "This means nothing! We're still going to win! Volchik, Aerial Ace!"

Volchik spread its chubby wings, shining with a white light, as the Storm Chick Pokemon dashed towards Selkid, ready to strike her with an unavoidable swipe.

"Selkid, freeze it on the spot with Ice Beam!" Serena ordered.

Once again, Selkid opened her mouth, releasing a bluish-white beam of freezing power at the incoming Pokemon, foolishly rushing towards the super effective attack.

"Volchik, Dragon Rage on the ground!" Sayaka ordered.

"What?"

"Chiiik!" Volchik did what it was told, releasing yet another stream of purple and blue flames down below, propelling the bird upwards just as the Ice Beam passed below him.

"Selkid, another Ice Beam!" Serena ordered.

"Hurricane!" Sayaka ordered.

As Selkid prepared another freezing ray, the still airborne Volchik began to vigorously beat its wings, quickly, blowing a powerful gust of wind that took the shape of a tornado. Selkid's attack was interrupted as the tornado around her lifted her into the air and violently launched her upwards.

"Sooooooooooooeeel!" Selkid screamed.

"Selkid, no!" Serena cried upon seeing the Sea Nymph Pokemon being buffeted by violent winds as she was pushed upwards.

"It seems you forgot there are more moves besides Thunder that benefit from heavy rain," Sayaka said, her smug smirk returning in full force. "Like I said before, you fail to think more than one step ahead. Volchik, Thunder!"

While Selkid was being launched upwards, Volchik sent yet another lightning bolt towards the dark clouds above, which quickly came crashing down on Selkid, making the Sea Nymph Pokemon scream even louder. Once the two attacks ceased, Selkid's body pummeled down, landing with a loud thud.

"Selkid!" Serena cried again.

Selkid was sprawled on the ground, her body bruised and beaten, her mouth agape and her eyes forming swirls. She had been completely defeated.

The crowd began to murmur, disappointed that Serena hadn't put Sayaka in her place when she was so close to victory. Some managed to send her a few comforting words. Not that they softened the pain of another defeat at the ninja's hands.

"And once again, an unworthy adversary falls before my might. Great job, Volchik, I think you deserve a rest," Sayaka said, returning her Pokemon. "I think I have nothing to worry about tomorrow's contest."

As Sayaka finally left, Serena also recalled her Pokemon. "Come back, Selkid. You did your best."

"Serena!" Ash said, as she walked back towards the group. "I'm sorry for your defeat. Are you okay?"

The honey blonde sighed. "I was hoping I could defeat her this time around. Way to start a pleasure cruise."

"Yeah, you were so close..." Bonnie lamented. She threw a punch forward. "How I wish I could have seen her face after you beat her!"

"I know it's very little consolation, but at least you collected some information on another of her Pokemon," Clemont told her. "If she tries to use that maneuver on you again, you'll be ready."

"Even if it's not much, it's something," Serena admitted. "Let's see more battles. Sayaka isn't the only one taking part in tomorrow's contest."

They all agreed with Serena's idea, and continued walking around the place, taking a look at any battle that might have drawn their interest. Despite doing it mostly for Serena's sake, Ash was the one who looked at the battles with the most interest and excitement, even taking part in a few of them himself, all of them resulting in resounding victories.

Seeing Ash battling and winning encouraged Serena to give another shot at battling somebody here. She ended up facing an older teenage boy that used an imp-like Pokemon with tan-colored skin, purple hands and feet with blood red claws, large red eyes with purple marks around them, purple and red quills on its back, a pointed snout like a beak and a pair of sharp fangs.

" *Chupacho, the Bloodsucker Pokemon. Poison. It comes out at night to suck the blood from sleeping prey. Its needles contain a numbing toxin that can incapacitate an enemy in minutes,*" the Pokedex explained.

Tempting fate once again, Serena chose a Pokemon with a type disadvantage and sent Sylveon out. Thanks to a well timed use of Protect and keeping distance from her foe with Swift and Shadow Ball, Sylveon ended up being the victor.

Her friends cheered her for her victory, which encouraged her to seek more opponents to challenge. She didn't win every battle, but she took every defeat as a learning experience. Plus, the fact that, unlike Sayaka, those who beat her were graceful in victory helped a lot. And while the painful sting of another defeat at Sayaka's hands didn't leave completely, it lessened over time.

"Hey, it's almost noon. Shall we go to the pool area in the upper deck?" Lilia suggested. "With the sun and the heat, it must be lovely there."

"It's noon already?" Serena asked, looking at the time in her Pokegear. "Whoa, I didn't even notice!"

"Time sure flies when you're having a lot of fun, doesn't it?" Ash chuckled.

"Indeed. Though, Lilia is right, I'm sure the upper deck must be-

"Cararalm, use Crabhammer!" Serena heard somebody say. Somebody whose voice was oddly familiar.

"Wait, that voice..." Serena said, as she began to walk in the direction of the voice. "I think I know it!"

"Hey, where are you going?" Bonnie asked, as she and the others followed the honey blonde, not sure what or who did she hear.

Serena tracked the voice to one of the nearby battlefields, where a dark skinned girl with dreadlocks was facing a redheaded boy of her same age in a battle. The girl was using a Cararalm, while the boy was using a feline, orange furred Pokemon the same size of Orchynx, with red paws and a red mark between its eyes and nose. It had a tail made of flames.

" Flager, the Cub Pokemon. Fire. The size of the flame on their tail indicates if it is close to evolving. Some Flager will intentionally eat

flammable items to make it bigger," the Pokedex explained after scanning the new Pokemon.

"Flager, use Flame Impact!" the redheaded boy commanded.

Flager's entire body was coated in a cloak of roaring flames as it shot towards Cararalm like a rocket.

"Cararalm, Guillotine!" the girl commanded.

Cararalm raised one of its pincers, clicking it twice as it shone a bright white light. It slashed Flager with it just as the Cub Pokemon got in range. The attack connected, as Flager was sent tumbling backwards, the coat of flames quickly dispelling. Flager landed on its back, unable to fight anymore.

"A clever use of Guillotine. It's an attack that takes a lot of precision to have any effect, but using it in response to the enemy getting closer that fast increases its chances of success," Clemont began.

"Who is that girl, Serena? Do you know her?" Ash asked.

"Yeah. I met her at the Bealbeach Department Store. She helped me fight the Nuclear Pokemon there," the Kalosian girl explained. As the girl recalled her Cararalm, Serena called her. "Hey there, Leona! Nice battle!"

Upon hearing her name, Leona turned around, a little surprised to see Serena. Though her surprise was short lived, fading into joy as the Alolan girl beamed at her. "Serena! Praise the Tapus, I wasn't expecting to see you here!"

"We weren't expecting to be here either, but we got lucky and somebody got some tickets for us at the last moment," Serena explained. "Guys, this is Leona. She's a coordinator too. Leona, these are my friends Ash, Clemont, Bonnie and Lilia."

"Nice to meet you! If you guys are friends with Serena, then you're my friends too," Leona effusively said.

"If you're also a coordinator, then that means that you and Serena are rivals," Bonnie pointed out.

"I guess you're right," Leona said, before shrugging. "But just because we compete against each other, doesn't mean we can't get along, right?"

"Well said!" Ash said. "By the way, we were going to the pool area in the upper deck. You can join us if you want."

"Really? Don't mind if I do, then! I've been battling all morning, and I could use some relaxin'," Leona said, stretching one arm above her head.

...

Half an hour later, after a trip to the ship's several daycares in order to drop their Pokemon there so they could rest and relax after a morning of battles, the group headed towards the pool area, situated on the upper deck.

"Cannonball!" Both Ash and Bonnie shouted at the same time as they threw themselves at the pool, resulting in one large splash following after another. The two youths resurfaced, laughing merrily as they began to playfully push, shove and splash water on one another.

While Ash and Bonnie had fun in the pool, Serena relaxed in the comfort of her lawn chair. She moaned a little as she stretched her arms, basking in the sun rays falling from above.

Next to Serena was Clemont, also enjoying some quiet time now that Bonnie was entertained with Ash. And to the other side of Clemont laid Lilia. The bespectacled girl's hair was no longer tied in a pair of

braids, but was let loose down instead. She was wearing a white bikini with green stripes on it.

And lastly, on the other side of Serena was Leona, sitting on her own beach chair. She was wearing a bright yellow bikini with a sarong.

The group was engaged in a conversation to get to know Leona better. The girl showed some interest in Kalos, considering the idea of heading there once her trip through Tandor reached an end. Given the similarities to contests, Leona was confident that she would do well in showcases.

"So you guys don't have Gym Leaders in Alola?" Clemont asked.

And then it was Leona's turn to talk about her home region. The lack of Gym Leaders was what surprised them the most, given how they were such an expected fixture of any region. Leona explained how they had Island Trials there as a rite of passage all young Alolan trainers went through.

"And once you finish the Trials, then what?" Serena asked.

"In that case, you're recognized as a worthy trainer in the eyes of the Tapus, somebody who loves and protects the islands and the people and Pokemon that live in there," Leona explained. "It's closer to a spiritual journey than the qualifications for any big tournament. Though I heard they were going to implement a League this time around. I'm not sure.

"Not that it would matter to me, since leagues and traditional Pokemon battling aren't my thing. That's why I came here to compete in contests. That's something I enjoy doing a lot."

"Also, these 'Z-crystals' you mentioned... what do they do?" Serena asked.

Leona's mouth curved into a playful smirk. "I could tell you right now but... where would be the fun in that? I'll show you tomorrow during

the contest. Make sure you keep a close eye on me during the Appeal Round."

"Hey guys, what are you doing?" Ash asked from within the pool. "Aren't you going to come inside the water?"

"Yeah! You've spent quite a lot of time chattering over there!" Bonnie protested.

"The water does indeed look really good," Leona said. "Come on guys! We already basked in the sunlight enough. Time to get soaked!"

"Alright then," Serena said.

"I think I could use a cool bath to fight off the heat," Lilia added.

"You guys go and have fun. I think I'll stay here," Clemont said.

However, before the blond could say anything, Leona pretty much appeared in front of him and pulled him by the wrist towards the pool.

"Nope, you don't, mister! You come to the water with the rest of us!" Leona cheerfully said.

"Wait! I don't get a say in this?" Clemont protested, as he futilely struggled against the much stronger Alolan girl. "Lilia, help!"

"I'm sorry Clemont, but I'm on her side," Lilia cheekily said, before she and the other girls jumped to the water.

...

The group spent the best part of the afternoon having fun at the pool, including Clemont, despite his initial protests. Once they decided they had enough fun, they returned to the daycare to retrieve their Pokemon and went to one of the many restaurants on the ship in

order to have dinner, where they got to know Leona better, the Alolan trainer telling them even more about her home region.

While she didn't mean any offense to her new friend and rival, Serena was only paying half of her attention to what the Alolan girl said; her other half of her attention was on an entirely different subject.

"My early loss notwithstanding, we had a lot of fun today. The mood is perfect. This is the most ideal time and place to make my move. No more excuses, no more delays!" Serena thought, as she glanced at Ash from time to time when she believed no one was looking at her.

Once the dinner was over, Leona announced that she would be returning to her cabin and go to bed early, in order to get plenty of rest for tomorrow's contest.

"And maybe you should too. If we're going to compete against each other, I want you to be at your best!" the Alolan trainer had said before leaving.

"Maybe we should heed her advice and go to bed early as well. We had quite the day," Clemont suggested.

"Good idea," Ash agreed. "And Serena isn't the only one who needs a good night of sleep. I want to be at my best to cheer her up and see her winning her fourth ribbon!"

"Pi, pikachu!" Pikachu cried in agreement.

Serena couldn't help but smile at Ash's earnest enthusiasm in his support of her. "Well, with you cheering for me, how can I lose?" she giggled.

The group headed out of the restaurant and on the outside deck as they walked towards their cabins. The night air was surprisingly warm, and there wasn't a single cloud in the sky, allowing the moon

and the stars in the sky to be seen in all their beauty, which prompted a lot of people to take a walk on the deck to enjoy the pleasant night.

Serena couldn't help but notice that there were many couples around them.

" That's it. Before this cruise comes to an end, I will tell Ash how I feel," Serena thought. She was tempted to tell him right here and right now, but she thought it was better than doing it in front of their friends and on the night before a contest. *" I'll do it after the contest. No more delays, and I'll make sure we won't be interrupted. Though, maybe Ash doesn't want to-"*

Serena's thoughts were interrupted when two of her pokeballs opened on their own all of sudden, releasing Selkid and Quetzoral. Ash's Aveden had also come out of his pokeball on his own.

"Guys? What's going on? Why did you come out?" Ash asked. The boy from Pallet wasn't somebody to get mad if their Pokemon decided to get out of their pokeballs without him telling them first, but if they did so, he worried over the reason.

They didn't answer. In fact, they didn't even look like they were listening to him. Then, the three of them went in the opposite direction they were walking to.

"Hey! Where are you going?" Serena asked, as she and the others chased after them.

Their worry increased. The three Pokemon didn't look like they had decided to run away from them for no reason, but they were clearly going somewhere. After turning at a corner, they saw a small multitude of people and Pokemon gathered around something. They could also hear some music coming from within the crowd.

"What's that music?" Bonnie asked.

"It sounds like a harp or a lyre," Lilia said. "Maybe the cruise also has musicians on deck?"

"Maybe that's what drew the Pokemon's attention? The music?" Clemont guessed.

"That has to be quite the hearing they have. I didn't start to hear it until we saw that crowd," Ash said.

As they got closer to the crowd, they could see who was playing: a tall and pretty looking man, with a pretty face and a long mane of black hair, with a long bang covering half his face. His clothing was rather quaint and downright anachronistic: the man was wearing a mint green vest, tan pants, forest green boots, and a green cloak over his body tied with a red brochure. He was playing a golden lyre shaped like the Pokemon Mew, which was holding a Keystone between its hands.

In short, the man looked like a bard from a past time.

People and Pokemon listened wordlessly to the man's slow and pleasant tune, some of the Pokemon bobbing with the rhythm. The only thing that could be heard was Ash's quietly gasping upon seeing the man, as his eyes glinted with recognition.

Though, not all Pokemon remained silent: Selkid took no time to join the bard as she intoned a song that matched the melody played by him, with Quetzroal and Aveden joining shortly after her, the three Pokemon singing in unison. The bard didn't seem to mind, and in fact he appeared to appreciate the trio of singers' unasked intervention.

The song went for a couple more minutes. Once the bard stopped playing, so did the Pokemon stopped singing, causing people to clap and cheer at them.

"Thank you. I'm honored by your ovation," the bard said, making a polite bow at the crowd.

"I can't believe it!" Ash excitedly said as he walked towards the man.
"Nando! Oh boy, I wasn't expecting to see you here!"

"Ash Ketchum," the bard, Nando, replied as his mouth slightly curved into a smile. "I must say I'm just as surprised to see you here as well. Though I'm happy to see that our paths crossed after the last time we met," his eyes then drifted towards Ash's friends behind him. "And I see that you travel with a new group of companions. I presume that Dawn and Brock left to pursue their own endeavors elsewhere?"

"Ash, do you know this guy?" Bonnie asked.

"Oh, yeah! Guys, this is Nando! He's both a trainer and a coordinator! I met him when I traveled through Sinnoh. We even fought in the Pokemon League," Ash stated.

"Where my Pokemon sadly fell before the might of Ash's," Nando reminisced.

"Nando, these are Serena, Clemont, Bonnie and Lilia!"

"It's a pleasure to meet all of you," Nando said, bowing again. "I hope you also enjoyed the song I just played, even if you only heard half of it. Then again, I'm flattered to see that your Pokemon liked it enough to join in themselves."

"Yeah, sorry about that," Ash apologized, sheepishly rubbing the back of his neck. "We didn't ask them to intrude in your performance."

"No apologies needed, my friend. Like I just said, I feel honored to see that my music inspired these Pokemon to join me in an improvised concert," the bard insisted.

"Sel, selkid!"

"Ave!"

"Tzoral!"

"It was beautiful. You're a really talented musician," Serena praised him. "Though, Ash said you are a coordinator? Does this mean that you will take part in tomorrow's contest?"

Nando shook his head. "While I'm a coordinator, I no longer take part in contests, given that I won the Ribbon Cup at the Sinnoh Grand Festival a year ago." The bard smiled in a rather enigmatic way before adding: "Though I will be present in tomorrow's contest, I can guarantee you that."

"Okay...?" Serena asked, not sure what he meant by that.

"So, you're a Top Coordinator now? Awesome!" Ash said. "I guess that you'll be focusing on winning a League now, right?"

"You'd be partially accurate in that. While it is indeed my current focus, I must say I also won the Lily of the Valley Conference," Nando said.

"You won a Pokemon League too!? Man, I better step up my game, or else all my rivals are going to leave me in the dust!" Ash said.

"Though, I must admit that, without you, Paul, and that Tobias individual, the level of the League wasn't quite as high as the year you competed in," Nando told Ash. "Plus, my victory at the League wasn't that meaningful in the long run, given that I fell before Flint, the very first Elite Four member I challenged."

"Flint? Ouch," Ash winced in sympathy. He then leaned towards his friends and whispered. "Flint is a Fire-type specialist, and Nando here specializes in Grass and Bug-types."

"Ouch," Bonnie echoed.

"So, if you're here, I guess you are going to take on the Tandor League like me?" Ash asked.

"I'd love to, especially now that I see that you're going to take part, but alas, that's not why I'm here. I only came to this cruise because somebody invited me to," Nando explained. "After that, I'll take a ferry to the Unova region."

"Ah, Unova. Been there sometime ago. It has lots of cool people and Pokemon. I'm sure going to love it," Ash told him.

"If you say so, then I have no choice but believe you, don't I?" Nando asked. "Though, I hope you don't mind if I retire for the night. I imagine I'll see you at tomorrow's contest," he then looked at Serena. "And given that you're going to take part in it, I bid you the best of luck."

"Thank you. We were also heading back to our cabins. See you tomorrow, Mr. Nando!" Serena said, bidding the bard goodbye.

With that, Ash and Serena returned their Pokemon to their pokeballs, and the group finally made their way back to their cabins.

"Boy, such a surprise seeing Nando here," Ash said. "It's a pity he isn't taking part in the contest, he's a very talented coordinator. I would have loved to see you face him."

"I believe you. Still, I have enough on my plate with Sayaka and Leona, so forgive me if I say that I'm glad I don't have to face a man skilled enough to become a Top Coordinator and win a Pokemon League in the same year."

"Well, when you put it like that..." Ash said.

"Still, I'm going to make sure to put on such a great show your friend will be impressed," Serena said, her voice full of resolve.

Yes, Serena was determined to make tomorrow's contest an unforgettable one.

And one way or another, it would be.

Author's Note: And here's the first part of the Luxury Cruise three parter! Hope it did a good job setting up expectationg for the next chapters to come and left you wanting for more.

For the record, I want to assure you that Serena WILL confess her feelings to Ash after the contest is over. I can guarantee you 100% that nothing unexpected will happen that will interrupt her or stop her from doing so like that time on the beach. I'm aware that we're quite a lot of chapters and words into this story, and some of you are getting a little antsy over the slow progress.

Many of you guessed that Sayaka would return for this contest, and you were right! I think it was time for the ninja to make her grand return, given that she's been no less than 25 chapters absent. Still, I'm happy that she made such an impression that so many of you were expecting her back at some point. And as you can see, she hasn't been wasting her time, given that her arrogance matches her skill.

But I'm pretty sure that none of you guessed that it would bring Nando back for this arc. Not gonna lie, it was a little self indulgent on my part, since Nando was by far my favorite of the DP Rivals, and I felt that if somebody should have won the Ribbon Cup other than Dawn, it should have been him (but they instead have Zoey win, which I find the blandest of the DP rivals). I'm pretty sure you can imagine what Nando's role in this arc is going to be ;)

Now, I know a lot of people are going to wonder if more characters from past seasons like Nando are going to make a return: I have planned for two other past rivals to make a return, but they won't be appearing anytime soon. Other than that, no character from past seasons, be traveling companions, rivals or Characters of the Day will make a return to this story.

Thanks to Fox McCloud, MegaSalamence64, Timmy, 61394, hirowriter and Viroro-kun for reviewing last chapter, and special

thanks to Viroro-kun for his awesome job as a betareader, whose edits and suggestions made this chapter so much better.

Next chapter, Serena will be competing for her fourth ribbon, but she not only will have to deal with Sayaka, but Leona as well. In the meantime, don't forget to drop a review.

Luxury Cruise II: Revelations

Chapter 30:

Luxury Cruise II: Revelations

Tandor Luxury Cruise

It was the day of the contest aboard the cruise.

Unlike the other contests, there was no entrance ticket as the price was also covered by the ship's own ticket. Still, Ash and his friends decided to turn up early in order to get good seats. And as usual, Serena left to enter the contest hall from the backstage entrance.

"See you at the contest, Serena!" Clemont said, waving at the honey blonde.

"Knock them out of their seats!" Ash added.

After thanking them for her support, Serena was led by a staff member to the coordinator's dressing room, which was packed with far more people than usual, where she changed into her usual contest costume, the white and pink dress with red ribbons around it. Once done, she was led to the Coordinator's Box and told to wait there until the contest began.

*" I think I could use Sylveon for the Appeal Round," Serena decided.
" As for the Contest Battle... perhaps Quetzoral, now that she has evolved? Or maybe Braixen, it's been a while since-"*

"Hey there, Serena!" a cheerful voice snapped the blonde from her short lived thoughts.

Turning towards the direction of the voice, Serena saw Leona walking towards her, beaming happily.

The Alolan girl was wearing an ankle-length, ruffled skirt colored blue, yellow and green, in that order, with a matching ruffled top that exposed both her shoulders and a little of her belly, and an orange and red headband around her forehead. Serena couldn't help but notice the strange bracelet was still there.

"Leona! I wonder when you'll show up. Glad to see you here, I could use some conversation to pass the time until the contest begins," Serena told her.

"I know, right? Having to wait when there's nobody you know to keep you distracted is the worst," the Alolan girl agreed. So, are you ready to rumble? Because I sure am! At the end of this contest, you'll be looking at the proud owner of three ribbons!"

"So I take it you have two ribbons already?" Serena asked.

"Exactly! It took me a lot of effort to win them, but I'm getting the hang of this," Leona proudly replied. "How about you?"

"I have three ribbons," Serena replied, trying not to sound boastful.

"Three already? Whoa, you're more than the halfway point then! You almost have a foot on the Grand Festival's door!" Leona praised, before growing a little upset. "I better catch up soon..."

"Don't stress yourself. Two ribbons isn't so bad. There's still plenty of time to win your remaining ones," Serena encouraged her, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"True. It will do me no good getting all worked up instead of working harder towards my goal, right?" Leona replied.

"Well said!" the honey blonde said, smiling confidently. Then, she looked at Leona from head to toe, and added: "By the way, lovely dress you have there!"

"Do you like it?" Leona replied, doing a quick spin so Serena could see it in its entirety. "My mom bought it to me as a goodbye gift shortly before I left home for Tandor."

"It's beautiful. Your mom has a magnificent taste," Serena said, and a part of her wished she could say the same about her own mother. Even if Serena loved her mother dearly and wouldn't trade her for any other woman, Grace's taste in fashion differed way too much from Serena's.

"Yours is amazing too! I mean, look at you! You almost look like a real princess!" Leona praised.

"A peasant dressed like a princess is still a peasant," a third voice intruded. Serena turned towards the source of the voice, and much to her displeasure, she saw Sayaka, already wearing her dark blue kimono with a moon and stars motif, strutting towards her. A malicious smirk adorned her face. "Ready to lose against me again, Serena? That is, if you aren't knocked out of the competition before I have the chance to do so myself."

Serena was about to reply, but Leona beat her to the punch. "Excuse you! Who the hell are you, and why do you think you can talk to anybody like that!?" Leona demanded. Her normally good and cheerful mood was gone in an instant, replaced by burning anger so hot, Serena swore she could feel heat emanating from the Alolan girl.

"My name's Sayaka of the Nami Clan, but most importantly, I'm the winner of this contest," she proudly declared.

"Nami Clan? What's that supposed to mean, are you some kind of big shot?" Leona asked, as she placed her hands on her hips, unimpressed.

Sayaka scowled in disgust. "I take you aren't from here then if you don't know what I'm talking about. It shouldn't be surprising, foreign garbage tends to flock together, after all."

"Watch how this 'foreign garbage' kicks your-" Leona said as she tried to stomp towards Sayaka, but was held by Serena.

"Don't. It's part of her tactic. She loves to rile her competition up in order to make them angry and unfocused," Serena whispered into the ear of the Alolan girl. "Don't let her get into your head."

Serena was a bit relieved to see that her words had the intended soothing effect as her new friend calmed down, even if her scowl didn't vanish.

"Serena's right. I shouldn't waste my breath with somebody like you," Leona said. "I'll save my energy for the contest, where I'll put you in your place."

"Keep telling yourself that, dear," Sayaka said, before turning on her heels and leaving the two girls alone again.

Leona's anger seemed to disappear now that she didn't have to deal with the unpleasant ninja, but her sour mood remained. "Who is that girl? And what the hell's her problem?"

"She's... somebody who takes contests way too seriously," Serena replied. "Though, as arrogant and rude as she can be, she's also a very skilled coordinator. If you happen to face her, please don't underestimate her."

"Don't worry, I won't. If anything, she seems to be the one to underestimate us," Leona noted, before her hand grabbed her bracelet. "And I'm going to make sure she regrets doing so."

...

Sometime later, all the seats of the ship's contest hall had already been filled. The crowd was murmuring and chattering excitedly about what kind of spectacle this contest would deliver. As the lights dimmed and the spotlight was cast over Jillian, walking towards the stage, people knew the contest was about to begin.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Luxury Cruise's Pokemon Contest!" the hostess announced with her usual enthusiasm, and the crowd cheered in return. "Thank you! Also let's give a warm welcome to the judges that will evaluate our wonderful coordinators: The cruise's resident Nurse Joy, the Venesi City Gym Leader Rosalind, and the S-Class connoisseur Ambrose Reigns!"

Just like with Jillian, the judges were welcomed by a warm applause from the crowd, though inevitably, Ambrose got quite a few boos in between.

"You said there are three judges, yet there are four seats on the judge panel," Lilia observed.

"Sometimes they get an additional judge, like a guest star," Ash explained. "The Moki Town contest had Professor Bamb'o as a judge."

"And now, let's give a very special welcome to this contest's special judge!" Jillian announced, confirming what Ash had just explained. "Hailing from Sinnoh, the Top Coordinator Nando!"

The crowd roared as the bard walked into the stage, waving at people left and right.

"Hey, is the musician we met last night!" Clemont pointed out.

"So, that's why he was on the cruise," Ash surmised.

"This extraordinary young man made quite the historical accomplishment by winning both the Sinnoh Grand Festival *and* the Ever Grande Conference in the same year!" Jillian explained, as she motioned to the giant screen in front of the audience. "Though you don't have to trust my words alone, and direct your eyes to the screen for your viewing pleasure!"

The screen flashed to life, first showing clips from what Ash assumed was the final battle of the Sinnoh Grand Festival. Nando had his

Altaria, now Mega Evolved, alongside his Kricketune, battling against a girl with dull pink hair styled in drill-shaped pigtails, which Ash identified as Dawn's rival Ursula. Her Gabite was now a Garchomp, and like Nando's Altaria was Mega Evolved, which fought alongside her Flareon. The video ended with Nando winning and being awarded the Ribbon Cup.

That video followed by a battle on a grassy field in the middle of a stadium, which Ash assumed was the Lily of the Valley Conference. The clips showed Nando battling in the finals against Barry, ending with his Mega Lopunny defeating Barry's Empoleon, and being declared the Sinnoh League Winner.

"Many thanks to all of you. It's truly a great honor to be here as a special judge," Nando said, as he took a seat next to Ambrose.

Once Nando's introduction was done, Jillian then went to explain the rules of the Pokemon Contests for those in the public not aware of them. Unlike the previous contests, this one would use the single format in both the Appeal and the Contest Battle. She then showed the ribbon the contest winner would take with him or her, finishing off with introducing the very first contestant, beginning the Appeal Round.

And thus, the contest began. Coordinators walked in and out of the arena one after the other, showing both the public and the judges what their Pokemon were able to do. Nando proved to be a kind and merciful judge, always managing to find something good about a coordinator's performance. The fact he always spoke after Ambrose helped to soften the caustic judge's harsh criticism, much to the coordinators' relief and the connoisseur's chagrin.

"And now, let's welcome our next coordinator! From Vaniville Town in Kalos, Serena!" Jillian announced.

"There she is!" Bonnie shouted.

"Come on Serena, you can do it!" Ash cheered. "Show them how amazing you are!"

"Heh, this certainly beats seeing a contest through a screen," Lilia noted. "Go Serena!"

"Sylveon, go!" Serena said, tossing a pokeball forward.

"Syl!" Sylveon happily cried, appearing among a tornado rainbow-colored fireworks.

"Sylveon, use Fairy Wind around yourself!" Serena ordered.

"Veon!" Sylveon nodded, and began to beat her four feelers in circular swipes, blowing a pink tornado around herself.

"Now, Swift into the Fairy Wind!" Serena ordered.

Keeping the tornado stable, Sylveon waved two of her feelers, releasing a flurry of golden stars that flowed alongside it, flying upwards and spinning at the top of the tornado, forming a golden halo. The people in the crowd gasped in awe.

"Make the tornado narrower, and finish it with Moonblast!" Serena shouted.

As Sylveon made the tornado thinner, the golden stars spinning at its top also came closer to one another. Sylveon then raised her head upwards, conjuring an orb of pink and white swirling energy, before launching it upwards. The orb absorbed the golden stars once it reached the top of the tornado, growing in size and taking the shape of a star, before it exploded into a mass of white, golden and pink fireworks.

The public erupted into cheers.

"An amazing performance from coordinator Serena! Let's see if the judges think the same!" Jillian said, as she motioned to the judge panel.

"A magnificent performance! That Sylveon knows how to enrapture the audience!" Rosalind gushed.

"Indeed. While the buildup was a little slow, it paid off big time at the end," Nurse Joy added.

"You had your Sylveon mix three random moves in order to make fireworks and called it a day. You could have also used an attack that wasn't either Fairy or Normal-type, but guess that was something too much to expect from your sorry excuse of Pokemon," Ambrose said with his usual venom.

"Honestly, I find it quite refreshing when a coordinator manages to do something so beautiful and eye-catching with something simple in nature. Plus, the way your Sylveon follows your commands, I can see how much she trusts you. You should feel proud of your abilities as a coordinator, Serena," Nando said.

Nando's kind judgement drew a smile from Serena. "Thanks a lot for your pleasant words. Come on Sylveon, return!"

"Whoa, look at that. Look how Nando takes what Ambrose says and twists it into something positive," Clemont said.

"Yeah. I bet the guy must be seething on the inside," Bonnie almost cackled.

A couple of coordinators went after Serena before Jillian would announce a name that was known to Ash and his friends, even if it was somebody they didn't hold a lot of appreciation for.

"And now, let's welcome our next coordinator! From Tsukinami Village, Sayaka!" Jillian announced.

The ninja girl looked as confident as ever. Wasting no time, she threw a pokeball forward.

"Glaceon, heed my call!" Sayaka said.

The pokeball produced a tornado of snow upon opening. The tornado then coalesced into a single sphere, which took the shape of the Fresh Snow Pokemon, followed by several bursts of ice shards.

Ash wondered if Sayaka had chosen an evolution of Eevee to throw a shade on Serena and her Sylveon.

"Glaceon, Ice Beam on the ground!" Sayaka began.

"Glaaaa!" Glaceon cried as it fired a beam of freezing energy, covering the ground on a thin sheet of flat ice.

"Great! Now slide across the ice as we practiced!" Sayaka ordered.

And Glaceon did as its trainer asked, sliding gracefully over the ice, almost looking as if it was figure skating, doing almost perfect figure eights and twirling mid air. The public applauded such an original concept for a performance.

"Glaceon, Ice Beam again! Second phase!" Sayaka said.

Glaceon fired several bursts of the chosen attack, creating several ramps made of ice. Glaceon slid towards said ramps, leaping into the air while doing small acrobatic maneuvers, before landing on the ice.

"And finish!"

The public's applause grew even louder, with many standing up and cheering loudly.

"And once again, Sayaka delights the public with a great and unexpected performance!" Jillian commented. "Though, are the judges just as delighted? Let's find out!"

"An important part of a coordinator isn't just coming up with beautiful performances, but to have the ability to think outside of the box, something the ragazza here is more than capable of doing!" Rosalind beamed.

"Not only was it a very original choice for the performance, but Glaceon's skating was so skilled!" Nurse Joy said.

"Your defamation lawsuits won't make me change my opinion on you being a spoiled brat who thinks she can buy her way into victory," Ambrose curtly stated.

"I don't think I can say anything my fellow judges haven't said already about your wonderful performance, so let me congratulate you for coming up with such a good idea. It's harder to make an impressive show with one Pokemon rather than two, but you didn't let that stop you. Well done!"

"Thank you for your kind words," Sayaka said, before returning Glaceon. She then glared at Ambrose. "Let's see if you're so smug when my family's lawyers strip you of everything you own!"

And with that, she left the stage, back towards the waiting area.

"And once again, Sayaka's performance leaves a pretty high bar for the coordinators to come. Let's see if the next one can match her! From Heahea City in Alola, Leona!" Jillian announced.

Leona pretty much skipped onto the stage, her skirt fluttering with each step, smiling widely and waving at the public.

"Rise and shine, Vaporeon!" Leona said, tossing a pokeball forward.

The capture device opened, releasing a flurry of bubbles that quickly merged into a single, large one. The giant bubble then popped, revealing the Bubble Jet Pokemon.

Ash couldn't help but notice that another rival of Serena had chosen yet another evolution of Eevee for the appeal round.

"Vaporeon, Surf around the stage!" Leona ordered.

Vaporeon conjured a torrent of water around itself, which lifted it above the ground, as it began to ride the water around the area.

"Now Vaporeon, Bubble Beam!" Leona followed.

"Va, vap!" Vaporeon cried, as it fired from its mouth streams of bubbles into the air without stopping the Surf, filling the air above it with bubbles of many sizes.

"Now, Aurora Beam on the bubbles!"

This time, Vaporeon fired a multicolored beam towards the many bubbles, making them burst in a shower of sparkles of the same color as the attack.

"Time for the big finish! Vaporeon, jump into the air!" Leona said.

While it was at the crest of the wave, the Bubble Jet Pokemon jumped into the air, trying to gain as much altitude as possible.

Then, as the public watched with bated breath, Leona held her left arm, which had a strange white bracelet with a light blue gemstone on it. Said gemstone began to shine with a light of the same color.

"Now Vaporeon, Subzero Slammer!" Leona said, as she made a series of arm poses, ending with a thrust of both her arms forward, her open palms facing each other. Vaporeon mimicked its trainer's moves as well.

"Subzero what?" Ash asked. "What kind of move is that?"

"Don't look at me. This is the first time I hear about it as well," Lilia said.

When they all looked to Clemont for answers, the inventor merely shrugged, meaning that he had no idea what it was.

People pretty much gasped loudly in shock as a bluish white aura surrounded Leona, before said aura flowed into the airborne Vaporeon through a stream of light of the same color, charging it with power.

"Vaaaaaaa... !" Vaporeon said, as an ice pillar emerged from below it, allowing the Water-type Pokemon to land safely. "EON!"

Vaporeon finished by firing a massive beam of freezing power at the stage below it, freezing all the water it had left solid, and creating a field of huge ice spikes. Then, after a couple seconds, the entire glacier shattered into a million ice shards that glittered beautifully under the lights of the spotlights, while Vaporeon landed on the ground gracefully.

"And done!"

Leona's performance was followed by an intense silence.

And then, the public roared and applauded with an intensity Ash had never heard before. The Alolan girl basked on the public's adoration, waving and thanking them profusely for their cheers and support.

"I'm told that the move Leona had used is called a Z-move, a kind of special move that originates in the Alolan region!" Jilian informed, as she tapped an earpiece. "They also told me that they're allowed within the contest rules! Though, even if the move was legal, was it enough to sway our judges? Let's find out!"

"That... that move! It was incredible! It was like bringing winter itself to the stage!" Rosalind gushed.

"Indeed. I have never seen such a spectacular display! It made me wish there were more Alolan coordinators if all of them can use those kinds of moves!" Nurse Joy added.

"You think I didn't notice that you used such a big move to cover for an otherwise mediocre performance, don't you? But I'm not as easily swayed as my colleagues," Ambrose said with his usual venom.

"If anything, I said that the use of the... Z-move, you called it? Was a masterful way to accentuate an already great performance. You used your first moves to set up our expectations, and the last move to

shatter them completely, just like how that glacier was shattered," Nando commended.

"Thanks a lot!" Leona said, before recalling Vaporeon. "I'm glad you liked my performance so much!"

"Between Sayaka and Leona, the bar for the appeal round is pretty high! Can our next coordinator clear it? Let's find out!"

...

"Serena! Serena! Serena!" Leona excitedly said as she entered the Contestant Box, rushing towards her new friend. "Did you see that?"

"I did!" Serena said, matching her excitement while clasping the younger girls' hands between her own. "Just... What was that attack your Vaporeon used? It was amazing!"

"It's a Z-move. Remember how you asked me yesterday what Z-crystals were for?" Leona said, and for added emphasis held the arm with the bracelet on it. "Well, that's what they're for!"

"Whoa, that's incredible!" Serena said. "And... where did you get them?"

"Well, first you need a Z-ring like this one," Leona said, pointing at her bracelet. "Then, you need to complete the Island Trials. For each trial you complete, you're given a Z-crystal in reward. Then, in order to use a Z-move, you need to insert the Z-crystal of the required type into the Z-ring's slot, do the required moves, and there you go!"

"Whoa... I never imagined that such a thing existed. Maybe once I finish my trip through Tandor, I might pay Alola a visit," Serena said.

"You totally should! It's an amazing place!" Leona agreed, her eyes glinting with joy. Her joy turned into pride, as she smirked and asked Serena: "By the way, how did Ninja Girl react to the Z-move? I bet she didn't see that coming!"

"She didn't say anything," Serena said, looking to the other side of the room, where Sayaka was standing, arms crossed and seething. "But judging by her body language, she didn't take it well. Like most of us here, I bet she's wondering what you did."

"Though, given the way everybody reacted... is this the first time you use a Z-move in a contest?" the honey blonde asked.

"Yup! I didn't want to use them from the very beginning, you know?" Leona replied. "And I believed that we're at a point where I'd start using them. Plus, given that this is such a special contest, I thought that the occasion deserved it, don't you think?"

The two girls continued chatting between each other as the few remaining coordinators showed their performances to the judges, though it was rather telling that none of them were able to draw such a reaction from the crowd as Leona's spectacle managed to do. Once the last coordinator was done, Jillian took center stage once again.

"And that was all for the Appeal Round! The judges have submitted their scores, and these are the eight coordinators that will pass onto the Contest Battle round!" she announced.

The screen displayed the portraits of the eight finalists, from higher score to lowest. Leona managed to claim first spot, followed by Sayaka. Serena was the fifth. She glanced at Sayaka, who seemed to be in shock over not being first. Her surprise, however, quickly turned into silent rage as she glared daggers at the Alolan girl.

"Wohooo, first spot!" Leona said, bouncing up and down with her fists in the air. "And then I'll take first spot at the Contest Battle too!"

"Don't count your Pidgeys before they hatch. You'll have to go through me first," Serena reminded the younger girl.

"And here is how the eight finalists will fight each other!" Jillian announced.

The portraits shuffled for a few seconds for dramatic effect, before they were split into four brackets of two. Serena was on the first bracket, Sayaka on the third and Leona on the last one. That means that Leona would face Sayaka in the likely case the two of them would win their first matches. And Serena wouldn't fight either of them until the finals.

"Look at that! I'll have a chance to knock that annoying girl out of the tournament before facing you in the finals," Leona said, reaching the same conclusion. "So make sure we meet at the finals, 'kay?"

"Sure. Though... be careful with Sayaka. Like I said before, that girl might have an attitude problem, but she's a very skilled coordinator," Serena warned her.

"Don't worry, I will," Leona smiled. "Good luck out there."

"Good luck to you too."

...

"Just like the other time, if Serena and Sayaka battle, it will be in the finals," Clemont noted, his eyes focused on the giant screen in front of the audience. "Let's hope it goes better this time around."

"It will. Sayaka made a mistake baiting Serena into fighting her. Now Serena has a better idea of the kind of tactics she's going to use," Ash confidently said.

"Though, I wouldn't count Leona out so soon," Lilia pointed out. "Did you see the sheer scale of that ice move she used?"

"Yeah. I didn't even know such a move existed," Bonnie said.

"Though, it didn't feel like a normal move. With the way she moved her arms and that bracelet of hers made her glow," Clemont noticed, adjusting his glasses. "It almost felt like... like..."

"Like a Mega Evolution version of a move?" Lilia helpfully supplied.

"Yes! Exactly!" Clemont said. His expression grew serious. "And that will give her a pretty big edge over her opponents."

"Look, there's Serena!" Ash said, noticing Serena and her opponent walking into the stage. "Let's go Serena! You've got this!"

As Jillian announced the beginning of the match, the coordinators sent their Pokemon. Serena chose Braixen for the first battle, while her opponent picked a Pokemon neither had seen before.

The purple color and suction cup-like mouth reminded Ash of Costraw, but this Pokemon had a stocky body with four limbs as opposed to Costraw's snake-like shape. Like Costraw, it also had a yellow band on its stomach with a purple symbol of an eye. Perhaps an evolution?

" *Trawpint, the Birdo Pokemon, and Costraw's evolution, " the Pokedex began, confirming Ash's suspicion. " Poison/Psychic. It uses its telekinesis to move objects behind its foe, preventing them from escaping.*"

Trawpint proved to be a tough opponent, but not enough to beat Braixen, earning Serena a victory when Trawpint was knocked out by a powerful Fire Blast.

After the battle in the second bracket came Sayaka's fight. She chose a Misdreavus against her opponents' Flaaffy. Thanks to a clever use of Will-o-Wisp and Hex, the Tsukinami Village native rose as the victor.

Then came the last battle of the first round. Leona's opponent used a Spritzee, while the Alolan girl not only used a Pokemon Ash had never seen before, but one with a rather bizarre appearance: it was a light orange blob with four little stumps that appeared to be legs, and a single, teardrop-shaped green eye in its face. A green leaf-like coat covered its back, and it had an U-shaped green and yellow crest on its forehead.

"Nupin, the Germ Pokemon. Grass/Electric. Nupin is the largest single-celled organism on the planet. It obtains energy from photosynthesis." the Pokedex explained.

"A germ Pokemon? I never thought such a thing existed," Lilia commented.

"Germ or not, it's still a cutie!" Bonnie gushed.

The battle began. Nupin used Thunder Wave to paralyze Spritzee, and attacked relentlessly with Energy Ball and Shockwave to achieve victory. Ash and his friends were a little disappointed that Nupin hadn't used an attack as epic as the one her Vaporeon had used to cap off the Appeal phase.

And thus came the semifinals. Serena's Pokemon of choice this time around was Minicorn, while her opponent used a Whimsicott.

The battle began, and the two Pokemon began to quickly trade attacks. However, when Minicorn's Horn Attack connected, something unexpected happened: Whimsicott began to flicker as if it was an illusion, before disappearing completely, leaving another Pokemon behind.

"What's going on?" Bonnie asked, confused. "Did that Whimsicott just transform?"

Said Pokemon was unknown to Serena's friends: this one was a bird with a stumpy body, white wings, a long neck with white ruffles around it, and two tails, one black and one white, just like how half its face was black and the other was white.

The Pokemon reminded Ash of Rosalind. And indeed, the Venesi City Gym Leader perked up upon seeing it. Perhaps she modeled her strange sense of fashion after it?

"I think I saw that before in Unova. Let me check something," Ash said, pulling out his Pokedex again.

"Masking, the Masquerade Pokemon. Psychic. It is capable of disguising itself as anything it likes. Although it appears to be a bird Pokémon, this is just an illusion. No one has seen its true form."

"Well, that explains it. I think," Lilia said.

"Of course. That Pokemon has the ability Illusion," Ash said, pocketing his Pokedex back.

"Illusion? I thought only Zorua and Zoroark had such an ability," Clemont said.

"It doesn't seem to be the case," Lilia said.

Masking proved to be a much more difficult opponent than Trawpint, teleporting all around the battleground, confusing Minicorn with Confuse Ray, and attacking her with powerful Psychic moves. However, in the end, Minicorn managed to turn the tides of the battle and score a victory, allowing Serena to pass to the finals.

It was now time for the second semifinal match, between Sayaka and Leona. Ash and his friends watched the two girls walk into the battleground. Both looked rather confident.

"And now, for the second semifinals battle, Leona from Heahea City in Alola! Versus Sayaka from Tsukinami Village!" Jillian announced, as the two coordinators pulled out their pokeballs.

"Rise and shine, Dartrix!"

"Volchik, heed my call!"

Ash frowned upon seeing the same Pokemon who had defeated Serena's Selkid. He had no idea what kind of Pokemon Leona had chosen, being a white and brown owl with a pair of green leaves over its eyes and two smaller leaves on its neck that looked like a bow tie, so he had once again to rely on his pokedex for answers.

" Dartrix, the Blade Quill Pokemon, and Rowlet's evolution. Grass/Flying. Supremely sensitive to the presence of others, it can detect opponents standing behind it, flinging its sharp feathers to take them out."

Further information revealed that Rowlet is often handed to new trainers as their first Pokemon in the Alolan region, meaning that this Dartrix was more than likely Leona's starter.

"Five minutes on the clock! Begin!"

~Leona (Dartrix) VS Sayaka (Volchik)~

"Let's begin! Open the fight with Dragon Rage, Volchik!" Sayaka said.

"Not so fast, bucko! Astonish!" Leona quickly followed.

As Volchik took a deep breath, small bits of blue and purple flames pouring out of its beak, Dartrix blitzed towards the Storm Chick Pokemon, a ghostly mist-like aura around it, and hooting loudly in Volchik's face, causing the Flying and Electric-type to flinch, interrupting its attack.

Sayaka growled something under her breath as she watched her score dropping, even if it was just a bit.

"Now, continue with Sword Dance!" Leona said.

"Don't let her! Shockwave!" Sayaka ordered.

Dartrix began to beat its wings rhythmically, as three ethereal swords made of red light spun around it. As this happened, Volchik's body crackled with electricity, before sending a barrage of homing lightning bolts. The attack connected, causing Dartrix to hoot in pain, while Leona's points dropped below Sayaka's.

"Aerial Ace!" Sayaka ordered.

"Nope! Astonish!" Leona followed.

Sayaka, however, smirked. "And follow it with Dragon Rage!"

Volchik spread its wings, which shone with a white light as it prepared to strike Dartrix before the Blade Quill Pokemon got in its face once again, the ghostly aura looking even more menacing. It hooted even louder than before, causing the Storm Chick Pokemon to flinch and interrupt the attack. However, the moment the effect passed, Volchik quickly took a deep breath and engulfed Dartrix in a torrent of blue and purple flames.

"Dartrix!" Leona cried, before looking at the scoreboard, her points dropping even further, now close to sixty percent.

"A masterful play by Sayaka, baiting her opponent only to turn a trap on her!" Jillian commented.

When the attack stopped, Dartrix had some burns around its plumage, but overall it was still good enough to keep fighting.

"Hoo, hoo!" Dartrix hooted vigorously.

"Volchik, Aerial Ace!" Sayaka called again.

"Parry it with Leaf Blade!" Leona countered.

Volchik dashed towards Dartrix, its wings once again glowing white, while a blade of green light grew out of one of Dartrix's wings. Both attacks clashed, however in the end, the Leaf Blade won out despite the type disadvantage, sending Volchik tumbling backwards. Sayaka's points dropped, but they were still a little above Leona's.

Upon regaining its balance, the Storm Chick Pokemon glared at Dartrix, and took a fighting stance, a fire brimming in its eyes.

"Volchik, time to-"

Sayaka's words died in her mouth when, after a crackling sound, Volchik began to glow with a blueish-white light as it began to grow and change, becoming slimmer, longer and with a more majestic presence. The light disappeared, revealing the Pokemon Volchik had evolved into.

Leona's points dropped even further, now close to the halfway point.

"Tasu!" the new Pokemon cried.

"Look at that folks! Sayaka's Pokemon has evolved in the middle of the battle!" Jillian excitedly commented.

Volchik's evolution had a long dark gray body with a red underbelly, a collar of feathers of the same color around its neck, and a long, thin yellow head. Its wings were much larger and better proportioned in relation to its body, being dark gray on the outside and red on the inside. It had the same stormcloud-shaped tail as Volchik.

Though the most outstanding attribute of this Pokemon was that it had three legs, two on the hind and a single one on the front.

"Oh come on! Now her Pokemon evolves mid battle? How is it that everything goes that jerk's way?" Bonnie protested, slamming a small fist on her seat.

Ash didn't say anything, and pulled out his Pokedex to scan the newly evolved Pokemon.

" Voltasu, the Three Legged Pokemon, and Volchik's evolution. Electric/Flying. It perches on rocky outcroppings and looks at the sky for many hours. They can foretell changes in the weather." The Pokedex droned.

"That Pokemon looks pretty strong. If Volchik was already a tough Pokemon..." Clemont began. "Leona has her work cut out for her."

"Well, well, well, look at that," Sayaka said, smirking widely. "It looks like the Twin Gods are smiling upon me. Your already nonexistent chances of beating me became even smaller."

"You think you're so hot, don't you? Thinking that you've already won just because you got a stroke of luck!" Leona said, pointing an angry finger at her opponent.

"I would have defeated you anyway even if Volchik didn't evolve," Sayaka confidently stated. "Though you don't have to trust my words; let my skill and the power of my Pokemon do the talking. Voltasu, Rain Dance!"

Artificial clouds formed above the battlefield, with downpour quickly following, soaking both the ground and the Pokemon on it. Ash's brow furrowed, the memory of Sayaka's battle with Serena fresh in his mind.

"So, she's going to go for unavoidable Thunder and Hurricane," Ash surmised. "And Dartrix is weak to both of those attacks."

"Now, time to fry that pesky owl! Voltasu, Thunder!" Sayaka ordered, as she thrust an open palm forward.

The Three Legged Pokemon quickly build up a massive amount of electricity into its body, before firing it upwards, into the dark clouds, turning them into storm clouds. A thunder clapped as the attack was about to land on Dartrix.

"Dartrix, Roost!" Leona ordered.

With a calm unfitting the situation, Dartrix stood on the ground, and relaxed. A green and silvery glow washed over it as the wounds taken over the course of the battle disappeared, restoring it to full health, just in time for the Thunder to fall upon him.

"HOOOOO!" Dartrix cried in pain, but was able to resist it with surprising endurance.

Both Sayaka and Leona lost an equal amount of points, much to the former's consternation. Not to mention that Dartrix looked nowhere near as hurt as it should have after taking a Thunder.

"And Leona is able to weather the Thunder with a clever use of Roost!" Jillian commented. "Which not only healed Dartrix, but made it much less vulnerable to electric attacks!"

"You think you're so clever, don't you?" the Ninja seethed. "That trick won't work with the next attack! Voltasu, blow it away with a Hurricane!"

"Vol, vol!" Voltasu agreed, as it elevated into the air and beat its wings vigorously, quickly forming the Flying-type attack.

"Oh, I don't think so!" Leona said, as she held the arm with the Z-ring around it, showing a dull pink gem on it instead of a light blue one, and quickly went through several poses, ending with a motion that looked like she was trying to scare a small child. A dark purple aura surrounded Leona's body, which was quickly transferred to Dartrix. "It's time, Dartrix! Never-Ending Nightmare!"

"HOOOOOOO!" Dartrix hooted, its voice carrying an eerie echo, as darkness exploded around the Blade Quill Pokemon, turning the battleground into a grim and sinister shadow of what it was, much to Voltasu's confusion and growing terror.

Then, a mass of black and purple tentacles made of pure energy burst from the ground and wrapped themselves around the Three Legged Pokemon, dragging it back to the ground, until there were so many, it almost looked like Voltasu was encased in a cocoon of darkness.

"Voltasu... !"

Then, the cocoon exploded into a fiery blast of black and purple flames, shooting upwards like the world's most terrifying geyser.

Once the explosion was over, the battleground returned to normal as quickly as it had transformed the first time. And much to Sayaka's horror, Voltasu was lying in the middle of a recently formed crater, completely motionless.

"Voltasu...?" she said, almost in a whisper.

BZZZZZZZZ!

The sound of a loud buzzer snapped Sayaka of her stupor.

"Since Voltasu can't fight any longer, the winner of this match is Leona, who passes to the finals!" Jillian excitedly announced, as people began to cheer.

"Yes!" Leona cheered, pumping a fist. "Get ready Serena! Time for our awaited battle!"

"NO!" Sayaka shouted, loud enough to be heard over the crowd's cheering. Her face was both burning red and contorted in a grimace. "NO! I refuse to accept this! She cheated! What kind of move was that!? I can't lose! Not like this!"

The crowd's roar disappeared, and everybody turned towards the raven haired girl. People in the stands began to murmur among themselves.

"To answer your question, missy, that was a Z-move, something Ms. Jillian here explained after Leona's Appeal performance," Ambrose said, who was enjoying Sayaka's distress more than he should. "And if you had listened to her, you'd hear her saying that Z-moves are covered by the Contest Rules, so their use was perfectly valid. Now, can you please get lost so we can have the final match, hmmm?"

Sayaka's entire body was trembling, her hands balled into fists so tightly that her knuckles turned white. She opened her mouth, but closed it, as if trying to think what she could say.

"This isn't going to be the last you hear of me," she threatened, before she turned around and stomped her way out of the stage.

As Sayaka left, the hall was sunk into an uncomfortable silence, as people in the audience began to whisper and murmur among each other.

"Ehm... and that was the second semifinal battle!" Jillian said, hoping to restore the contest's usual mood. "Now we'll have a break of ten minutes to fix the battleground, before we head to the finals!"

...

Inside the waiting area, through one of the screens hanging off the walls Serena has just watched in awe how, in a single move, Leona managed to turn a sure defeat into a resounding victory. The honey blonde was happy that her friend had won and that Sayaka had finally tasted defeat, if her reaction was any indication. But those thoughts were quickly replaced by a worrying realization.

She had to face Leona if she wanted that ribbon.

The power of the Z-moves was overwhelming. What could she do to counter them? She didn't have any move in her Pokemon's arsenal, not even Braixen's Fire Blast, that could counter something so powerful. And they didn't look like they were that easy to dodge either.

"Serena!" Leona's excited voice snapped the Kalosian teen from her thoughts, as she saw the smiling Alolan skipping towards her, like a kid on sugar rush. "Serena! Serena! Serena!"

"Leona!" Serena greeted her. "Congratulations on your victory!"

"Thanks! Ha, you should have seen that arrogant girl's face when she lost!" Leona laughed. "She was on the verge of throwing a temper tantrum! Oh boy, it was hilarious! Too bad she didn't go

through with it, since seeing her being dragged away by security would have made this contest worth it just for that..."

"Guess that girl has some trouble taking defeat in stride. Hopefully it will be a learning experience for her," Serena hoped. "Anyway, now only one more battle remains. Ready to face me?"

"Ohh, you bet! I'm so glad I get to face you in the finals! And even if I lose, at least the ribbon will go to somebody that's not one hundred percent arrogance and rudeness," Leona said, nodding. Then, she placed her hands on her hips, and smiling widely added: "Of course, that's in the unlikely case of me losing."

"Somebody's confident, huh?" Serena teased, crossing her arms over her chest. "You might find I'm not as easy to beat as you think, even with those nifty Z-moves of yours."

"I'd hate it if you were. What's the point of a competition if there are no strong opponents to beat?" Leona asked.

"Heh. A friend of mine tends to say that often," Serena said, as an image of Ash quickly came to mind. "And likewise, I also look forward to defeating such a challenging opponent such as yourself."

Despite her confident exterior, Serena was hoping that both she and her Pokemon could back up that bravado with actual actions.

...

In no time, the battleground was repaired from the damage done in the previous battle, and Jillian announced that the final battle could begin now, much to the public's joy.

"Come on Serena, you're almost there!" Bonnie cheered.

"We believe in you!" Lilia shouted.

"You've got this!" Ash cheered as well, even if he knew that her opponent was going to be a tough nut to crack.

"And we've reached the contest's climax, folks! The battle for the Ocean Ribbon between finalists Serena and Leona will take place now!" Jillian announced. "Coordinators, present your Pokemon!"

"Pancham, go!" Serena said, sending a pokeball forward.

"Pan, cham!" the Playful Pokemon cried, emerging from a tornado of golden stars and blue curved streams of light.

"Rise and shine, Jerbolta!" Leona said, throwing a pokeball as well.

From a storm of blue lightning emerged a bipedal rodent with a rather long thin tail ended in a tuft of hair. Its body was light blue with a white belly, and had a row of large, dark blue spines covering the back of its head and its back, blue eyes, and diamond-shaped yellow marks on its cheeks.

Its body constantly crackled with yellow electricity.

"Pika?" Pikachu asked, shooting the new Pokemon a curious look.

"We're going to see quite a few new Pokemon in this contest, aren't we?" Ash chuckled, as he pulled out his Pokedex to scan Leona's choice.

" Jerbolta, the Sand Mouse Pokemon. Electric/Ground. The spines on its back stand rigid when charged with electricity. It is popular with children and young trainers," the Pokedex explained.

"Hey, how is that the picture in the Pokedex has different colors?" Bonnie asked.

Because indeed, the Jerbolta in the Pokedex's screen wasn't like the one in the battleground: the one displayed in the Pokedex had a brown body with yellow arms, dark brown spines, yellow eyes and blue diamond-shaped cheek marks.

"My guess is that Leona's Jerbolta must be what's commonly called a 'shiny' Pokemon," Clemont explained. "Some Pokemon have the

chance to be born with different colors. Remember that white Phantump we encountered once?"

Bonnie nodded in understanding.

"Five minutes on the clock! Begin!" Jillian said.

~Serena (Pancham) VS Leona (Jerbolta)~

"Alright Jerbolta, begin with Electro Ball!" Leona ordered.

"Pancham, use-"

But Serena was unable to finish her command, as in less than a second, the Sand Mouse Pokemon formed a ball of electricity on the tip of its tail, before swinging it at Pancham. The poor Panda could barely see what's going on before it was blasted with electricity.

"Chaaaaaaam!" the Playful Pokemon cried.

Serena lost ten percent of her total points.

"Whoa, so fast!" Bonnie said in awe. "I barely saw anything!"

"Great, Jerbolta! Now follow with Rollout!" Leona commanded.

"Pancham, stop it with Arm Thrust!" Serena urged her Pokemon.

As Jerbolta curled into a ball and steamrolled towards its opponent, the Playful Pokemon jumped back to his feet, seemingly recovering from the sudden Electro Ball. Curling a paw into a fist and winding it back, Pancham punched forward with a glowing fist, interrupting the attack and sending Jerbolta tumbling backwards.

This action caused Leona to lose the same amount of points that Serena had lost a few seconds ago.

"Well, that attack wasn't that fast, was it?" Lilia asked.

"Jerbolta no longer seems to overflow with electricity," Clemont observed, as he adjusted his glasses. "Perhaps an ability?"

"Yeah," Ash said, Pokedex in hand. "According to this, Jerbolta's ability is Quick Charge. It increases its speed a lot at the beginning of the match, but disappears after using the first move."

"So Leona had a sure shot, and took advantage of it," Clemont said.

"Time for us to counterattack! Pancham, Dark Pulse!" Serena ordered, thrusting an open palm forward.

"Paaaaaan... !" Pancham cupped his small paws, gathering dark energy between them, before thrusting them forward, releasing said energy in the form of a black and purple beam. "CHAM!"

"Jerbolta, plow through it with Rollout!" Leona shouted.

"Jer, jer!" Jerbolta cried, as it curled into a spinning ball again, and powered through Pancham's attack.

Jerbolta's fast spinning split the Dark Pulse into multiple smaller beams, taking minimal damage from it. Once the Sand Mouse Pokemon reached Pancham, it slammed against him with its full body, cancelling the attack.

"And follow up with Fire Punch!" Leona ordered.

"Bolta!" Jerbolta chirped, delivering a punch into Pancham's face with a small flame-covered paw, sending the Playful Pokemon reeling backwards.

"Pancham!" Serena cried, as her points dropped below the three-quarters mark.

"And now Electro Ball!" Leona said.

Once again, Jerbolta formed an orb of lightning on its tail in a similar manner to Pikachu, before swinging its tail forward, launching the

yellow sphere at Pancham.

"Pancham, quickly, deflect it with Thunder Punch!" Serena said.

"Cham!" Pancham cried, regaining his balance, as his paw curled into a fist and crackled with electricity, before slamming said fist into the coming sphere of lightning.

"Fire Punch again!" Leona ordered.

Electro Ball was pushed back towards Jerbolta, who made no effort to dodge it as the Sand Mouse Pokemon prepared to deliver Pancham another fiery punch, before the orb of electricity crashed harmlessly against its body.

"Arm Thrust!" Serena cried.

Just as the Electro Ball washed over Jerbolta's body, Pancham was in front of it, delivering a powerful punch to the face that sent the Sand Mouse Pokemon tumbling backwards.

"That Electro Ball might not do any harm to Jerbolta, but it still blocked its vision for a moment, giving Pancham the perfect opportunity to counterattack!" Jillian commented, as Leona's points dropped, falling lower than Serena's.

"We haven't played all of our cards, not by a long shot!" Leona declared. "Jerbolta, Swagger!"

A deep red aura surrounded Jerbolta as it crossed its arms, smirking playfully while waving its long tail at Pancham. That same aura appeared around Pancham as well, as his eyes began to glow red.

"Paaaaaan! Panchaaaaaaaam... !" the Playful Pokemon cried angrily, though his voice sounded slurred.

"Pancham? What's wrong?" Serena asked.

"Pan, pancham!" Pancham shouted, as it stumbled towards Jerbolta, ready to hit it with a Thunder Punch.

"Pancham, what are you doing? Don't use that attack!" Serena implored.

"Perfect! Now Jerbolta, show him your Earth Power!" Leona said, smiling confidently.

"Jeeeer... !" Jerbolta chanted, as its body glowed with a golden aura, before slamming the ground with its tail. "Bolta!"

A golden shockwave tore through the ground carving a furrow, with Pancham not making any attempt to dodge it. Eventually, the shockwave slammed into Pancham, blasting the Playful Pokemon backwards.

Serena's points dropped close to the halfway point.

"Well done, Jerbolta! Now follow with Electro Ball before he can snap out of the confusion!" Leona commanded.

"Bol, bolta!" Jerbolta said, flinging a rather large ball of lightning from the tip of its tail.

"PANCHAM!" the angry and confused Pancham cried, slamming both paws on the ground, summoning a row of blue stone pillars in front of him.

While Serena recognized the Stone Edge, the rock columns were taller, thicker and generally way harder and more robust than the ones she was used to seeing, not to mention that they rose from the ground much faster. Needless to say, the Electro Ball was shattered by one of these columns, before the last one slammed into Jerbolta, flinging it back.

Leona's points dropped once again, matching Serena's.

"Ouch! It seemed that Jerbolta suffered the side effects of Swagger! While it confuses the enemy Pokemon, it also increases their attacking power!" Jillian commented.

That moment, the aura around Pancham disappeared, while his eyes returned to normal.

"... cham?" Pancham asked, sounding as if he had just woken up from a bizarre dream.

"Pancham, are you alright?" Serena asked. When the panda nodded, her body relaxed a little, and allowed herself to smile. "Good! Time to win this, then!"

"We'll be the ones to take that ribbon home! Jerbolta, Earth Power again!" Leona shouted.

Once again, a golden aura surrounded Jerbolta. The Sand Mouse Pokemon slammed its tail on the ground, sending yet another golden shockwave that cracked the ground as it traveled.

"Pancham, Stone Edge on yourself!" Serena shouted.

"Pan!"

Pancham slammed both paws on the ground, summoning a rising stone pillar just below him, which launched the Playful Pokemon into the air.

"What?" Leona asked, surprised at the maneuver.

"And now, Dark Pulse!" Serena said.

While he was flying through the air Pancham fired yet another beam of darkness at the groundbound Jerbolta, who was wide open from casting Earth Power, and took the attack in full, blasting it backwards, while Pancham landed gracefully on the ground.

"Jerbolta!" Leona cried.

Leona's points pummeled, reaching close to one quarter. Jerbolta got up, wheezing and panting. It seemed that her score wasn't the only one on the edge of collapsing.

"Alright Jerbolta, let's finish this with the next move!" Leona said, holding the arm with her Z-ring. It had a yellow crystal on it. Jerbolta nodded, and in unison, trainer and Pokemon made a series of moves, finishing with a pose that looked like they were making a "Z" with their arms.

People in the public began to roar in anticipation for what it was promising to be a spectacular move.

"They're going to use a Z-move! Pancham, don't let them! Stone Edge once again!" Serena cried in panic.

"Pan, pancham!" Pancham said, slamming his paws on the ground and summoning a row of rising pillars.

Just as she finished the sequence, a yellow aura of electricity appeared around Leona's body, before it was transferred to Jerbolta.

"Let's do it, Jerbolta! Gigavolt Havoc!" Leona said.

Jerbolta spread its small arms, forming a sphere of electricity not unlike an Electro Ball, only this one was *way* larger. He thrust the gigantic lightning sphere forward, which plowed through the Stone Edge, shattering the rock columns as if they were made of fragile glass, until the attack reached Pancham, resulting in a massive explosion of electricity.

"PANCHAM!" Serena cried.

Once the explosion ceased, Serena could only watch in horror and sadness at Pancham's still body lying on a crater, not different from how Sayaka's Voltasu had ended up.

BZZZZZZZZZZZZ!

"Pancham can't fight any longer! This means that the winners of this match, and the winners of the contest are Leona and her Jerbolta!" Jillian announced.

The public broke into loud cheers as the stage's screen replaced the scoreboard with a picture of Leona and her Jerbolta, with the word "WINNER" written under it in large, capital letters.

"YES!" the Alolan girl pumped a fist. "We did it! Thank you Jerbolta, you were amazing!"

"J-Jer..." Jerbolta wheezed, exhausted, but still smiled.

As the defeat sunk in, Serena just sighed and returned her defeated Pancham. "Return, Pancham. You were great."

A few moments later, Leona was on a podium, the four judges around her. This time, it was Nando the one tasked with awarding the winner with the ribbon.

"The Ocean Ribbon is your, young lady," the bard said, presenting the open case with the ribbon on it. "Congratulations on your well earned victory."

Completely giddy, Leona picked up the ribbon inside it. "Thanks a lot. Praised be the Tapus, I won the Ocean Ribbon!" she said, as she raised the ribbon above her head.

...

Once the contest was over and the group gathered together, Serena suggested having a special dinner to celebrate Leona's victory, something the Alolan girl appreciated in earnest.

Despite having a good time, the sour taste of defeat was still present in the honey blonde's mouth, so she excused herself as politely as she could and went for a walk outside. Eventually, she reached the

poop deck, where she rested over a handrail as she watched the sun set over the ocean. A few Wingull flew over the horizon.

"Serena...?" a known voice asked.

Turning around, the honey blonde saw Ash standing there. Despite his mouth curved into a smile, she could see he looked a little worried.

"Oh, hey," she said, before she leaned over the handrail once again, and gazed upon the sea.

Ash did the same. "So... how are you doing?"

"I'm fine," she curtly replied. "Worried about me?"

"A little. Even if the circumstances aren't exactly the same, you took your last defeat pretty badly," Ash pointed out, though his tone made sure he wasn't chastising her or anything.

"Rest assured I don't plan to throw myself into crazy training again," Serena told him. "How did you know I was here?"

"The Pokegear's GPS," was Ash's reply. "Sorry for that, but after you left the dinner... Well, I was a little worried."

Serena frowned at the pink device around her wrist as if it had personally betrayed her. Though, she expressed her frustration with a mere sigh. She felt a hand on her shoulder, and saw Ash smiling again, this time more earnestly.

"I know you must feel bad. Losing is never fun, no matter how many times you have lost before. And I know that at times like this stuff like 'never give up until it's over' might sound a bit hollow but..." Ash trailed off, as if contemplating what words he should use next or even thinking what to say at all. "... well, I want to say that, until the sour feeling goes away, you have me to support you. And not just me, but all of our friends as well."

His earnest declaration drew a smile out of her. She wanted to make sure defeat didn't get the best of her like it did before, but he didn't urge her to get over it and force herself to keep an upbeat attitude. When everything else failed, she could always count on Ash to be there for her. Because that was the kind of person Ash was.

There was a reason why Serena had fallen so badly for this boy.

Then, a realization hit her: they were completely alone on a luxury cruise, looking at the vast blue sea before them as the sun slowly set. The mood was simply perfect. It was the perfect opportunity to do something she had been postponing for quite some time.

But first, a little preparation was in order.

"Ash, turn your Pokegear off," Serena told him all of sudden, as she did the same.

"Eh, why?" Ash asked, a little surprised.

"Just do it, okay?" Serena insisted. "I... look, I want to tell you something very important, and I don't want any interruptions, so I'm not taking any chances, like when Clemont called us when we were at the beach!"

"O-Okay..." Ash complied, and switched off the communication device.

"Pi, pikachu!" Pikachu said, as jumped out of Ash's shoulder, ran to the other side of the deck, and perched on the handrail, facing towards the sea.

"Pikachu?" Ash asked confusedly.

"*Guess somebody knows how to read the mood...*" Serena couldn't help but chuckle inwardly at Pikachu's unexpected show of consideration, before prefacing: "First of all, Ash, let me reassure

you that, while I said this is important, it's nothing bad or something you should be worried about."

Ash smiled, and chuckled. "Well, it's good to know that. So, what do you want to tell me, then?"

" *Here we go. No turning back now,*" Serena thought, as she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She opened her eyes, steeled herself, and began to speak. "Ash... since the day I met you on that summer camp back at Pallet Town, you made quite the impression on me. I wasn't sure if I would ever see you again, but when several years later I saw you on TV risking your life to save Professor Sycamore's Garchomp... even if at first it was an excuse to leave home, I still wanted to see you again. You didn't remember me at first, but even before that, you still invited me to travel with you, Clemont and Bonnie.

"I thought our journey through Kalos would be an opportunity not only to see you again, but to get to know you better. And I found that my impression of you years back was only the tip of the iceberg. Ash you're... you're kind, compassionate, and will always support those in need. Your optimism and energy are infectious. Your drive and passion are inspiring. I don't think I would have changed as much as I did, and accomplished so many things, if you weren't there supporting me the whole time."

"Hehe, well... thanks!" Ash chuckled nervously, as he scratched his cheek. Was he blushing? Then again, Serena could also feel her own face heating up. "Though, you make it sound like I did all those things for you entirely. You shouldn't downplay your own efforts like that, Serena. All your accomplishments were your own."

"I know. What I wanted to say is... Ash, you're a very important person to me, and-"

"You're also very important to me too, Serena," Ash said earnestly. Though clearly not in the way the honey blonde intended.

"He's not getting it. I need to be more direct. Blunt. Forward,"
Serena took another deep breath. "Ash, what I want to say is... Ash, I like you! Like, a lot! And I don't mean just like a friend!" she finally said, her face growing redder.

"S-Serena...?" Ash stammered, looking shocked.

Serena clasped both of Ash's hands with her own. "Ash I... I can't bottle this any longer. I really liked the way things were -are!- between us but... but it's just not enough. I was afraid of your reaction, of ruining our wonderful friendship. These feelings won't go away, and will only get stronger and stronger the more time I spend with you. So, what do you say, Ash?" Serena asked, squeezing Ash's hands. Her cheek became deep red as she could feel her body temperature going up. "Would you like for us to be... boyfriend and girlfriend?"

There, she had finally said it. In no uncertain terms. No room for confusion or misunderstandings. No interruptions. Her feelings, all laid bare for him to see. All that was left was to wait for Ash's answer.

So, Serena waited.

A second passed. Followed by another. And another. And another.

But Ash's answer didn't come. The boy remained silent, completely still, looking at her with his auburn eyes full of surprise and shock.

"... Ash?" Serena asked, her voice quivering. "Did you hear what I just say?"

"Y-Yes, I did..." the raven haired boy stammered.

"Well... don't leave me waiting! I just opened my heart to you!"
Serena almost squeaked. "What do you say?"

Ash pulled his hands from Serena's clasp. That wasn't good.

"... A-Ash?" Serena asked, as an unpleasant knot formed inside her stomach. " *No, no, no, please no...* "

Ash took a step backwards. That wasn't good either.

"I... I... uh... eh..." Ash stammered, trying to say something, but all he could say was unintelligible gibberish. He took another step back.

"Ash...?" She repeated his name.

Then, much to her shock, Ash turned back and ran away.

"I'm sorry!" Ash yelled, before disappearing around a corner, leaving Serena alone.

Author's Note: And thus, like I promised, Serena finally confessed her feelings to Ash! Hey, look at that, a mob of people is coming here, no wonder to congratulate me on writing such a fine chapter!

... wait, why are they carrying torches and pitchforks? Oh shit!

Again, sorry if this isn't the reactions you guys were hoping. All I ask is that before you decide that this story is ruined forever and abandon it in anger, for you to wait at least until the next chapter to do so. Like I said before, this is going to be a three parter, and the next chapter is going to be just as important as these two had been.

Since the last contest had a lukewarm reception, I hope you enjoyed this one better, given that it featured a returning rival as well as a new one, plus Vitor getting a well deserved rest after being the only rival for three contests. As for Aisha, don't worry about her, I haven't forgotten about her, I promise she will be back soon. Also, given that the reception to Sayaka's return last chapter was more... intense than I had anticipated, I hope

you guys enjoyed how she got her ass handed by Leona (even if it was followed by Serena getting her ass handed as well).

Thanks to deviantart user GrayComputer for drawing many fanarts of Lilia as she looked in the last chapter.

Check out the Ao3 version for a picture of Leona in both normal and contest outfits.

Thanks a lot to Fox McCloud, Danny, Guest #1, 61394, hirowriter, MegaSalamence64, Brightnova169 (who also has reviewed every single chapter on this story as well, something only Fox McCloud has done so far) and Viroro-kun for reviewing last chapter, as well as special thanks to Viroro-kun for his awesome job as a betareader, whose suggestions and edits made this chapter so much better.

Next chapter, the fallout of Serena's confession, as well as the end of the cruise trip. Trust me, you don't want to miss it. In the meantime, be kind and please drop a review with your thoughts on this chapter.

Luxury Cruise III: Reciprocation

Chapter 31:

Luxury Cruise III: Reciprocation

Luxury Cruise

Ash ran.

Where was he running to? He had no idea. The people walking through the deck, enjoying the pleasantly cool sea breeze, shot him looks of confusion, but the teen boy paid them no mind. Right now, his heart was a violent whirlwind of emotions: confusion, fear, awe, dizziness... while those recent words echoed inside his mind.

He didn't even realize that Pikachu was running behind him, calling him, given that the electric rodent felt that there was something wrong with his beloved trainer.

Ash, I like you! Like, a lot! And I don't mean just like a friend!

These feelings won't go away, and will only get stronger and stronger the more time I spend with you.

Would you like for us to be... boyfriend and girlfriend?

He left the deck and entered a small lobby, with nothing other than a pair of couches and a porthole, thankfully empty, since the boy could use some solitude in order to keep his thoughts straight. Panting and sweating a little from the impromptu run, Ash took a deep breath in order to calm himself down.

"Serena said she likes me. Serena said she likes me!" Ash said, unsure if that was something good or bad.

What could he say? All the good things Serena said about him prefacing her confession also applied in reverse. Serena was a wonderful person with plenty of positive, even praise-worthy qualities, and Ash couldn't feel luckier than a girl as great as her was both his friend and traveling companion.

Then again, he had similar feelings for his previous female companions, such as Dawn, and May, and Misty, and even Iris.

Ash wasn't somebody who used to think much about romance. He wasn't like Brock, who asked out every girl he met, or more recently Bonnie, on her brother's unwilling behalf. Even if Ash didn't actively seek romantic love, he didn't discard the possibility of one day having a girlfriend, if he ever found that special someone.

Yet it seemed that love did seek him out.

Could Serena be that special someone? Serena certainly felt that Ash was her special someone.

Now, only one question occupied his mind: how should he answer Serena's question. Could he really grow to like her the same way she liked him? What if he said yes, only to find that they weren't meant to be, ruining their friendship in the process? What if he said no, but then he realized he also liked her back, and missed his chance to be with her?

"Why is this so complicated?" Ash whined out loud to no one in particular. "If only I could ask somebody..."

But who? Brock was really crazy about love, but Ash doubted that his friend could give him good advice, given his lack of success with the opposite gender. Perhaps one of his previous female companions, like Misty or Dawn? Then again, it's not like they had that much experience on the topic either.

In the end, all his options were reduced to one. Sitting down on one of the couches and switching his Pokegear back on, he dialed a

number. After a couple ringtones, a familiar face appeared on the screen.

"Hey there, mom," Ash greeted his mother, forcing himself to smile.

"Oh, hello Ash! I'm so glad to hear from you! How are you finding Tandor? What about your badges, did you get any more?" Delia excitedly asked. However, her excitement was short-lived, as a worried scowl appeared on her face. "Ash, you seem upset. Did something happen?"

"Eh, you could say that..." Ash replied, growing a little uncomfortable. "It's about Serena..."

"Did you two have a fight?" Delia asked, sounding preoccupied.

"No, no, it's not that! Serena and I are just fine!" Ash was quick to reassure her. "Well, it's that... Serena just told me she likes me. As in, she liked me more than a friend, you know what I mean?"

Delia gasped loudly, covering her mouth with both hands. "Oh my goodness, she really did? Finally! And what did you say?"

"Finally? What do you mean...?" Ash was about to ask something, but the answer came on its own. "You knew!"

"Yes, Ash, I knew."

"Did she tell you?"

"No."

"Then how-"

"I have eyes, Ash," his mother replied flatly. "Remember I had the two of you here in Pallet for a few days. And when we were all together, having lunch, dinner, or watching TV or playing a board game... the way Serena looked at you, how her body language shifted when you were close to her, the way her mood brightened

when she talked about you... it was painfully obvious that that girl was crazy for you, Ash."

Ash wanted to reply that, despite traveling with Serena for more than a year, he didn't feel like she behaved differently with him than with other people.

Or maybe he didn't pay enough attention to her to notice the difference. After all, didn't Serena say that she has been in love with him for quite a long time? Then, another memory hit him.

I want to tell you something very important, and I don't want any interruptions, so I'm not taking any chances, like when Clemont called us when we were at the beach!

Ash would never forget that call, given the circumstances surrounding it. What were they doing before that? They were on the beach, Bonnie was playing with their Pokemon while Ash and Serena played in the water. They had been hit by a large wave, ending back on the sand, with her on top of him and...

And...

And...

"Oh goodness, I'm really stupid, aren't I?" Ash thought, as he now saw that moment with completely different eyes.

"Ash? Ash?" his mother's voice snapped him out of his thoughts.

"Oh, sorry, mom! I spaced out there!" Ash replied, chuckling bashfully. "Did you say something?"

"I said what did you say to Serena when she told you that she liked you," Delia asked. "I'd like to think that you said yes and you were calling me to tell me you have a girlfriend, but I have the feeling that it's going to be more complicated than that."

"I... I didn't say anything..." Ash replied dumbly.

"... what?" Delia asked, tilting her head.

"I ran away," Ash blurted out.

"YOU WHAT!?" Delia shouted, startling her son.

"Oh... oh my goodness!" Ash yelped in realization. "Serena just poured her heart onto me, and I ran away like a total dumbass! This talk is pointless, I bet she hates me now!"

"Calm down, Ash," Delia said, taking a deep breath herself. "Yes, what you did was stupid. But I'm sure it wasn't enough for Serena to hate you like that. If you explain to her that you panicked and needed some time to put your thoughts in order, I'm sure she'll understand."

Ash wasn't so sure, but she didn't feel like arguing about that. Plus, there was a part of him that chastised him for being so ready to think the worst about Serena.

"I... okay," he replied. "Though, that's the reason for why I called you. I don't know what to say."

"Alright son, take a deep breath, keep calm, and answer this question," Delia calmly said. "What is Serena to you? How do you see her?"

"You know, I think I used to know Serena, but after this... it feels like she's a completely different person, you know?" Ash replied.

Delia shook her head. "It might seem like that now, but trust me, Serena is still the same girl you befriended at the beginning of your journey through Kalos, and once the shock wears off, you'll realize that. Now answer the question."

"Well, Serena is... she is, um, she's great. A great friend, and companion. I'm super happy that I met her when I did, and I think my journey wouldn't have been so great if she wasn't part of the group," Ash explained.

"And what would you think of the idea of the two of you being a couple? Do you find it appealing? Or you wouldn't like that?" Delia asked.

"I... I don't know. I think it would be nice?" Ash replied weakly.

"Okay, let's try a different approach," Delia said. "Ash, what would you think of Serena having a boyfriend? As in, a boyfriend other than you?"

"I'd be really happy for her!" Ash said without hesitation.

"You would?" Delia questioned, raising an eyebrow. "My, that's very mature of you, son."

"Of course! Serena is a great girl, and if she wants to have a boyfriend, she deserves to have one, no matter who!" Ash confidently declared.

Then, an image formed within his mind, that of Serena with another boy, one with a generic appearance. Holding hands. Laughing. Having fun together on dates. Kis-

Ash pushed that image out of his mind. Of course, not because it wasn't making him feel upset and uncomfortable, not at all!

"Anyway, this isn't about any other boy. Serena confessed to me," he put special emphasis on the last word. "Can we go back to what I should do?"

Delia smirked, amused, clearly not buying Ash's deflection, but thankfully willing to humor him. "Alright. From what you've told me, you aren't quite sure about either accepting or rejecting her proposal. You don't feel like jumping into a relationship with her, but at the same time you're afraid you might regret your decision if you don't. Am I right?"

"Yes, that's about it."

"Alright, in that case, my suggestion would be to accept, but take it slow," Delia said. "As in, go on casual dates with her. Whenever you visit a new town or city, try to do something just the two of you. Go to a nice restaurant. Go watch a movie. Do something fun together. Nothing too overly romantic or intimate, you know what I mean?"

"Yeah, something I'd do with any other friend?" Ash asked.

"Exactly. And, in time, you'll see what your feelings for Serena are. If you feel like you two are getting closer, then you can think about taking your relationship to the next level. If your feelings for her don't change, then you should simply remain as friends," the woman explained.

"Yes, that sounds great!" Ash said, smiling brightly for the first time. "Thanks for the idea, mom!"

Delia smiled back. "You're welcome, sweetie. And remember, don't be afraid if things don't work out between the two of you. One way or another you will always have Serena as a friend."

"I know. Thanks again, mom."

"Now you better go and talk to Serena. Given how you ran away when she confessed to you, you better not leave her waiting for much longer," she told him.

"Oh, right! Let's hope she isn't too mad at me," Ash said. "Until next time, mom!"

"Goodbye, Ash," she said, before the call ended and the pokegear's screen switched back to the main menu.

Ash took a deep breath, steeled himself, and exited the lobby.

"Alright Pikachu, time to talk with Serena!" he said.

"Pika!"

...

The first place Ash thought in looking for Serena was the same spot when he had left her. To no one's surprise, not even his own, she wasn't there. The next place he checked was the restaurant where they had had dinner, thinking that maybe she returned to Clemont and the others, looking for emotional support after he hurt her with his foolish reaction, but not only he didn't find her there, his other friends weren't there either.

"Just how long have we been talking?" Ash asked. He felt that he had only been talking with Serena and later his mom for a few minutes each, but apparently it was way longer than that.

He tried to locate her using the pokegear's GPS function, but found no signal. Guess she didn't remember to turn it on again. Not that Ash could have blamed her.

That only left one place Ash thought Serena would be: her cabin.

"She better be here, because if that's not the case, there's no way I'm going to find her on a ship this big," Ash internally grimaced. Taking a deep breath, he knocked on the door. "Serena, are you there? It's me, Ash!"

"Ash?" Came Serena's voice from the inside. The Kantonian trainer was relieved to hear that she was indeed there. The sounds of footsteps against the wooden floor was followed by Serena opening the door. She appeared to be happy, but Ash noticed that her eyes were wet and a little red. A knot formed on his stomach over the idea of causing Serena grief.

"Hey there, Serena. Can we talk?" he asked.

"Sure!" she said, opening the door of her cabin fully and pulling Ash inside. She led him towards a small loveseat, where the two of them sat down. Ash was going to say something, but Serena opened her

mouth first. "Ash, listen, what I said before... let's just pretend it never happened, okay? It was dumb of me."

"Serena-"

"So let's go back to how things were before. It worked for us just fine, didn't it?" she said with no small amount of fluster.

"Serena-"

"No need to make things awkward between us. We have a beautiful friendship, and it was wrong of me trying to change that."

"Serena-"

"So let's enjoy what's left of this cruise trip and-"

"Serena!" Ash said, raising his voice enough to shock the honey blonde into silence. "Serena... I think that the two of us know that we can't ignore what happened before between us."

Serena didn't say anything, she just looked at Ash with an unreadable expression. Even if her lower lip was quivering.

"Though first of all... I want to say that I'm sorry for running away like that before," Ash began, averting Serena's gaze. "I... even if what I did has no excuse... um, I felt a bit overwhelmed and needed some time to put my thoughts in order."

"It's okay, Ash. I guess I didn't think how me dumping all my feelings onto you might affect you," Serena said.

"But after doing that, and asking somebody for advice, I think I'm ready to give you an answer," Ash said.

"You... you are?" Serena almost squeaked, looking at him with a glint in her eyes. Now that the veil had finally been lifted, Ash could see much better how Serena was feeling: hope that he would return her feelings, mixed with fear of getting rejected.

Hell, he swore he could hear her heart loudly thumping inside her chest.

"The last thing I want is to make you unhappy, Serena," Ash thought, before he began speaking. "I... I'm not somebody who thinks about, or understands romance much. I do think, though, that you're a great girl, and any boy would be really lucky to have you as his girlfriend," Serena was about to say something, but Ash held a hand to stop her. "And I feel really lucky over you wanting me of all people to be your boyfriend. But... I still have some doubts about this romance thingy. Can I really make you happy? Can I be happy with you? How can I know if this is going to work?"

"Ash...?" Serena asked, a little confused. "What do you want to say?"

"What I mean is... maybe I'm not ready to jump into a relationship just now-"

"It's okay, Ash. I understand. I'm willing to wait no matter how long until you can give me a definitive answer," Serena interrupted him.

"... you didn't let me finish," Ash gently chided her, making her look bashful. "What I want to say is, I'm not ready to jump into a relationship right now, but... maybe we could do something a little... smaller? Or simpler? Until we get there?"

"A-Ash? What are you suggesting?" Serena asked, her face quickly turning red.

"As in... taking things slow? Like, going on dates, but nothing too big and fancy. Go to dinner together just the two of us. Walk through a beach. Do something fun together," he began. "And then, if we see that things work, we can take the relationship up a notch? So, what do you say? Are you okay with it!"

"YES!" she yelled, as she threw her arms around Ash... before quickly pulling them back, her face red of embarrassment. "Oh, right,

small steps... I mean... sure, I'm okay with that, Ash."

"Awesome!" Ash cheered. "So, there's one more day until the cruise ends. How about if we have our first date tomorrow?"

"Of course, I'd love to," Serena said. Her voice was even, but she was practically beaming.

"Cool!" Ash got up from the loveseat, and walked towards the cabin's door. "So, let's decide tomorrow morning what to do then. Oh, and guess we'll have to tell the others about... us." Ash said, rubbing the back of his head. "Well, I better go back to my cabin. Good night, Serena."

"Good night, Ash."

Ash closed the door behind him and went towards his cabin, two doors to the left, Pikachu trailing behind him. The boy felt so much relieved now.

"That went pretty good, don't you think?" Ash asked his starter. "I was afraid that Serena might be mad at me for running away, but mom was right. Also, tomorrow, I have my first date with Serena!" Ash said, feeling... something. Something that he couldn't quite put into words.

But he knew it was something good.

After Ash and Pikachu entered their cabin and closed the doors, what sounded like a high pitched squeal of joy muffled by a pillow could be heard coming from Serena's cabin.

...

The next morning came, and the group, plus Leona, gathered together to have some breakfast before deciding what they could do to pass the day. As the group were eating and making some small talk, Ash and Serena decided it was the time to tell them about their

most recent development. While they weren't planning to leave the group anytime soon, they hoped the others wouldn't mind Ash and Serena wanting some time alone with each other from time to time.

Their reaction didn't take long to show.

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!" Bonnie loudly squealed, grabbing her cheeks as she bounced on her seat, causing everybody else to jump.

"Bonnie, not so loud!" Clemont chastised her.

"It was about time!" Bonnie said, still happy, before frowning a little at Ash. "Do you have any idea how long Serena has been pining for you? And you were none the wiser!"

"Yeah... but I am all the wiser now!" Ash tried to rebuke.

"Well, I don't know the two of you for that long, but I'm happy for you two!" Leona said. "Hope one day I can find a boyfriend too!"

"Ehhh... Ash and I aren't boyfriend and girlfriend just yet," Serena clarified, her cheeks turning a little pink. "We're going to take things slow to see if things can work between us on such a level, before making it official."

"Though I don't see why things wouldn't work. You get along and share many things in common," Lilia pointed out, before smiling at them. "And personally, I think the two of you make a very cute couple."

Ash joined Serena in her blushing.

"Awww, look at them, they're even getting flustered in unison!" Leona cooed, before letting out a mirthful laugh.

"So, do you plan to do something special today?" Clemont asked, throwing them a lifeline from the girls' teasing.

"Well, I'm not really sure, I'm not that good at this romance stuff, hehe," Ash chuckled sheepishly, before he turned towards Serena, "So, um, how about a dinner, just the two of us?"

"That would be lovely, Ash," Serena replied. She looked calm on the outside, but was loudly squealing on the inside. A romantic dinner date with Ash! At last!

"Though, Ash, you won't plan to go to your first date in your usual clothes, will you?" Bonnie asked, looking at the older boy with a critical eye.

"Yeah. What's wrong with my clothes?" Ash asked, mildly offended, as he looked at his clothes.

"It's a date! You can't just go dressed like that! You should wear something nicer!" Bonnie shouted, throwing her arms in the air.

"Nenene!" Dedenne mimicked her.

"I don't think I have anything nicer than this..." Ash said.

"Well, that has an easy solution! This cruise has plenty of clothing stores, so we can buy you something for your date!" Leona chimed in.

"Guys, there's no need to-" Serena was about to say.

"We can buy something for you, while we're at it," Lilia said, smiling amusingly at the honey blonde.

Serena was going to protest, but found herself unable to. She was somebody who enjoyed shopping, even if it was just window shopping, and doing it with friends, with girl friends, made it even better.

"Alright then, count me in!" Serena cheered.

"Well, it seems you guys already have a plan for the day," Clemont said, laughing nervously. "I think my Pokemon and I will-"

"Oh, but you're coming with us, Clemont," Lilia said in a matter-of-fact way.

"Why? I don't need any new clothes!" Clemont protested.

"No, but since we're at it, I plan to buy one or two things for myself, and I'd want your opinion," Lilia said. She then gave him a disarming smile. "Plus, it would be a nice way for us to spend some more time together, don't you think?"

"W-Well, if you ask it like that, hehe," Clemont laughed nervously, as his cheeks turned a little red.

Bonnie just crossed her arms and huffed, but didn't say anything.

"Then it's settled! Today's shopping time!" Leona cheered.

...

And indeed, shortly after they were done with breakfast, the group quickly went from one clothing store to another, looking for anything to try on.

First they focused on Ash, since they wanted to pick something for him first so the girls could shop to their hearts' content without worry. Given that Ash and Serena made abundantly clear that their dates right now were meant to be more on the casual side, they picked something for Ash that was a little nicer than his usual clothes, but not too formal: a short sleeved navy blue shirt and dark gray long pants. A perfect balance between simplicity and elegance.

Once they were done with him, it was the girls' turn, and let's say they spent far more time choosing clothes for themselves, not just for Serena, than they did on Ash -not that the boy would complain, mind you. For him shopping for clothes was just as fun as swimming with

a jacket made of bricks-. And just like Lilia said, she made sure to ask Clemont regularly what she thought of the clothes she put on, with the inventor trying to give a variety of compliments in an attempt not to sound repetitive.

On the other side, Serena didn't ask his opinion on the clothes she chose. Maybe she knew Ash didn't know that much about fashion. Not that the boy minded, since it was the truth.

"Then again, Serena looks really good in anything, so asking would be moot to begin with," Ash thought, as his mind replayed a series of memories of Serena wearing something other than her usual clothes, such as all the dresses she wore for her Performances, that Fennekin-like costume she donned for a Pokevision video, even something as simple and utilitarian as her Rhyhorn racing jumpsuit looked good on her.

Ash was suddenly filled with a desire to know what Serena would be wearing for their date tonight. Thankfully he wouldn't have to wait too long for that.

...

The group took the whole morning until the girls were satisfied with their shopping, each of them carrying several bags with all the new pieces of clothing they had bought. After having lunch, they decided to split in order to enjoy their last day on the cruise on their own. Ash went back to the main deck where battles were taking place, and challenged some of the people there, winning most of his matches, with only a couple losses.

Before he realized, the time for the date came, and returning to the cabin, he changed into the clothes the girls had selected for him.

"So, how do I look, Pikachu?" Ash asked, a bit unsure.

"Pi, pika!" the rodent said, giving his trainer a tiny thumbs up.

"Hehe, thanks," Ash said, looking at himself. "I don't think this kind of clothes suit me much, but if this is what you usually wear for a date..."

"Pi..." Pikachu shrugged.

"Hey Ash!" Bonnie said, as she entered his cabin, the thought of Ash maybe being in the middle of getting changed not even crossing her young and excitable mind. "Oh, you changed already! Good! Serena's waiting for you outside!"

"Awesome! Alright buddy, let's go!" Ash told the yellow rodent.

"Ash, you aren't thinking about taking Pikachu on the date, are you?" Bonnie asked, looking at the boy disapprovingly.

"Pika...?" Pikachu asked, tilting his head quizzically.

"I take Pikachu everywhere with me," Ash said, sharing his starter's confusion.

"Not on your first date! It has to be something only between the two of you!" Bonnie insisted. "Don't worry, I'll take good care of Pikachu while you and Serena are on your date!" the blonde promised.

Ash and Pikachu looked at each other. In the end Ash shrugged. "Well, sorry buddy, but if what Bonnie said is true..."

"Pi, pikapi!" Pikachu said, shaking his head as if telling Ash not to worry, while scurrying towards Bonnie's side.

"Great! Don't worry about Pikachu, I'll take good care of him! Serena's waiting for you outside! Go, go, go!" Bonnie urged, almost pushing Ash out of his cabin.

"I'm going, I'm going!" Ash said, trying not to lose his balance as Bonnie pushed him. "Sheesh..."

"Hey Ash. Ready to go?" Serena's voice asked.

"Sure thing, we can-whoa!" Ash was taken aback when he laid eyes on Serena.

In front of him was Serena, smiling bashfully. She was wearing a new ensemble consisting of a pink halter top with puffy sleeves, a white knee-length skirt, and a pair of short pink boots. Her hair was styled in a ponytail held by a bright red ribbon.

Serena blushed a little, but giggled. "I assume that reaction means you like what you're seeing?"

"Y-Yeah, you look really pretty in those clothes... I mean, it's not that you don't look pretty when you're wearing something else, you look really good no matter what you're wearing!" he quickly amended.

"Thank you, Ash," Serena replied, but kept giggling. She was enjoying Ash being flustered by her for a change. "You look very handsome too."

"Aw, thanks. I'm still not sure about these clothes, but if you think they look good on me..." Ash said, rubbing the back of his head.

"So, shall we go? I'm sure you must be pretty hungry," Serena said.

"Sure!" Ash said, as he grabbed Serena's hand and began to walk, but stopped when Serena let out a high pitched squeak. "Serena? Are you okay?"

"Y-Yes! It's just, I wasn't expecting you to hold my hand," Serena said, turning a little red.

"Bonnie told me that people do that on dates," Ash replied, scratching his temple. "Though if I'm making you uncomfortable..."

"Oh, no! It's fine! I simply wasn't expecting it," Serena reassured. "Come on, let's go."

And thus Ash and Serena headed towards the restaurant Serena had picked up -Ash really didn't mind which one as long as the food

was good- in order to have their dinner date. The restaurant in question was called Camerupt's Cabin, and fittingly, there was a logo of a chef cooking over the fire produced by a happy Camerupt's volcano-like hump. The words "traditional Hoennian cuisine" were written under it.

"A Hoennian restaurant?" Ash asked.

"I was about to go to Hoenn before I changed plans, so I felt it was appropriate," Serena said, as she and Ash chose a small vacant table.

A waiter came, and the two made their orders. Once he left the couple to wait for their food, an awkward silence followed.

"Uh... should we talk about something?" Ash asked.

"Yeah, I believe we should," Serena replied.

Despite the statement, another awkward silence followed.

"Eh..." Ash began, as he started looking around. "So... are you enjoying the cruise?"

"Yeah. It's... it's been fun..." Serena said, tapping on the table with her fingers on both hands. "I always wanted to be on one..."

"I see. Well, that's good," Ash replied, chuckling awkwardly. "And, um..."

Ash humming went on for way too long without finding another topic to tackle. Serena felt that she needed to intervene, but her brain was drawing blanks as well.

Unfortunately, their stilted conversation ended there, as it was replaced by yet another awkward silence as the two of them tried and failed to find another topic to discuss, if only to fill the uncomfortable silence, as the tension in the air grew thicker and

thicker. Eventually, Serena couldn't take it anymore, and was the first to break down.

"Ugh, sorry about this, Ash! I may not look like it, but I'm super nervous!" Serena admitted. "Not only I've never been on a date before, but I want this date to be perfect so you're left wanting for more! Yet here I am, unable to come up with a topic or carry on some small talk..."

"Hey, it's okay, this is something new to me too," Ash reassured her. "And no matter how this date goes, it won't change my opinion of you for the worse, Serena. So let's enjoy the dinner, okay?"

"Okay," she smiled, her nerves soothed by Ash's words. "Heh, you always know what to say, don't you? Guess that's one reason I fell in love with you."

"It still feels odd hearing you speaking about me like that," Ash said. "I never thought that I would be the kind of guy a girl would be interested in."

"Why do you think that, Ash? You have plenty of wonderful qualities, and lots of girls would love to be with somebody like you," Serena said, displaying an earnest smile at him.

"It's not that I think I'm somebody awful or anything, it's just that..." Ash began to scratch his cheek, as if trying to come up with the right words. "People tell me that I have a one-track mind? And I kinda see their point. I can get a little crazy when it comes to Pokemon battles."

"You're a passionate person. That's not something to be ashamed of, or something that would disqualify you from a relationship," Serena stated, now more gently, but still frowning a little. "And anybody who spends some time with you can tell that Pokemon battles aren't the only thing you think of."

"Plus..." Serena now grew a little bashful. "That passion of yours is also something I like from you as well. Not only does it drive you to

be the best, it also inspires those around you, both people and Pokemon."

"I better start complimenting you as well, or else this is going to be a little one sided," Ash joked, chuckling awkwardly.

"That's what being in love is like, Ash," Serena replied.

"Love..." Ash repeated. Then, his face changed as if something clicked in his mind, a mystery that needed to be solved. "Say, Serena... your feelings for me... did they play a part in you deciding to come with us to Tandor?"

"I'd be lying if I said it wasn't the case," she replied, wiping back a strand of hair from her forehead.

"Guess it makes sense," Ash replied. "Clemont had that job at the power plant, and I didn't have any plans yet so Tandor was a destination as good as any other, but you already had plans to go to Hoenn. Though, what if there were no contests in Tandor? Would you have come anyway?"

Serena shook her head. "In that case no, I wouldn't have come."

"Oh," Ash said, sounding a little disappointed, even if he had no reason to be. Did he really think that Serena would follow him everywhere no matter what? "Even if you still liked me?"

"My feelings for you would have never wavered, Ash," Serena said, grabbing his hand. "You would always be my goal. But I still need to follow my path, even if that path would have taken me apart from you. But deep down, I know that we would have met each other again."

"But what if when we met again, I had a girlfriend? Or you fell for another boy?" Ash asked.

"While I don't know if I would have fallen for another boy, in case we met again and you found a girl that made you happy..." Serena averted her eyes for a second, Ash guessing that he really didn't like to even entertain the idea. However, she later smiled. "... guess I would be happy for you."

"That's something very mature of you," Ash said.

"What did you expect? That I would throw a tantrum or have tried to break you up?" Serena asked in a joking manner. "Though, had our paths took us in different directions after we left Pallet Town, I think I would have at least confessed my feelings to you. So even if you ended up with another girl, at least I wouldn't end up lamenting missing my chance."

"But if we went our separate ways, we wouldn't be able to go on dates like we're doing now," Ash pointed out.

"Maybe... but at least you'd know what I feel for you," Serena said, shrugging. "So even if this doesn't work out... Well, at least I'll be happy to know that I tried."

"Hey, don't knock yourself out so soon, this is just our first date," Ash gently said. "And I'm going to need more than one measly date to see if we can work out as a couple or not."

"I'll take the fact that you're looking forward to more of this as a good sign then," Serena giggled.

That moment, the waiter returned with their dishes: Fried rice with hot sauce and sauteed berries for Ash, and sweet potato soup with coconut milk for Serena. After thanking him, the two of them continued their conversation as they dug in.

"Heh, this is pretty good," Ash said, savoring each bite of his dish. "You have a good eye for restaurants!"

"Well, it looked nice, and the online reviews were mostly positive," Serena replied. "And I'm sure the one negative review was from somebody who wanted to pay with 'online exposure' rather than money, and was told no."

"This definitely matches the food Clemont makes," Ash said. "Not to the level of my mom, but I don't expect anybody to surpass her, haha," Ash laughed.

"Yeah, your mom's cooking was not of this world," Serena said, remembering Delia's homemade meals during their stay at Ash's house. "Wonder if most of Kanto cuisine is anything like hers."

"Still, but not even close!" Ash proudly replied. Then, a realization dawned upon him. "You know, despite being in my home region, we didn't get to see much of Kanto beyond a little of Viridian city, Pallet Town, and the way between the two places."

"... you're right," Serena said, reaching the same conclusion. "So, what do you suggest? For us to visit the rest of Kanto once we finish our trip through Tandor? Though, given that it's your home region and you have returned many times, maybe you'll want to go somewhere new."

"Eh, I don't mind. Like you said, Kanto is my home region, so it will be like returning home," Ash replied. "Besides, it's not like I won't have anything to do there. I can always challenge the gyms of Kanto and give the Indigo League a second run," Ash chuckled sheepishly. "Looking back, my first trip was kind of a disaster. Not only did I earn half of my badges without even defeating the gym leaders, but I barely trained for the league and even went with a Pokemon that didn't even obey me, and my league run... Well, it wasn't bad for a newbie, but back then I was quite the brat with an ego, and looking back now I see how things could have been better."

"Don't beat yourself up over that. We all have been beginners at one point. Remember the disaster that was my first Showcase?" Serena reminded him.

"Still, your first run was much better than mine. You never had another blunder like that, and you made it to the finals of the Master Class Showcase," Ash pointed out. "For your first big competition, you did really well!"

"Well... I had a lot of help from both you and Clemont and Bonnie. Had I started my journey on my own-"

"You would have done great, because you're also passionate and persistent, you have a lot of imagination for spectacular combination moves, work really hard, and are really kind to your Pokemon, who respect you a lot in return. " Ash finished resoundingly.

"I know, but I still got help. Heck, you're helping me a lot by teaching me about contests and sparring with me. If it wasn't for your spars, I wouldn't have gotten as good at contests so quickly," Serena countered.

"Maybe I helped you, but it was you and your Pokemon who put in the work and won those ribbons, so don't bring yourself down," Ash gently chided her.

"Guess the bitter taste of my last loss still lingers in my mouth..." Serena said. Though, fortunately, she decided not to follow that train of conversation, and returned to a previous topic. "Though if you're up for visiting Kanto, then count me in. You visited my home region, so it's only fair that I see yours, don't you think?"

"Yeah. Oh, and the best part, Kanto has contests too! So it's not like you'll be twiddling your fingers during the whole trip!" Ash pointed out.

"Even if that wasn't the case, I would have looked for something to do myself," Serena said. "Maybe I would have tried my hand at collecting badges."

That answer surprised Ash, whose eyebrows went up. "Really? That would be..."

"That would be what, Ash?" Serena asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, you have never shown any interest in taking part in leagues," Ash said. "Not to say that you'll suck at it or anything! It's just that it sounds odd coming from you."

"It would be a way to expand my horizons. Like that Nando friend of yours, who became a Top Coordinator and League Winner at once," Serena said, her lips slowly curving into a smile, as she was seduced by the idea. "Maybe I could do that next if I win the Grand Festival."

"What about being the Kalos Queen?" Ash pointed out.

"I haven't forgotten about it. Aria better watch out, because soon her crown shall be mine!" Serena boasted half jokingly.

"Serena Gabena, Top Coordinator, Kalos Queen, and League Winner. That would be quite the resume!" Ash laughed.

"... though maybe I'm getting a little ahead of myself," Serena said, returning to reality. "I don't even have all the needed ribbons for the Grand Festival, and here I am, talking about winning a league and becoming Kalos Queen."

"Hey, being ambitious is good! You'll never reach the stars if you only aim for the clouds," Ash encouraged her. "Look at me! My aim is to be the best Pokemon trainer who ever lived!"

"I guess you're right. But for the time being, I think I'll focus on the now," Serena said.

"That's good too," Ash agreed.

...

The two of them continued chatting amiably about different topics as they finished their dinner. Then, once they felt it was late enough, they paid for the dinner and headed back to their cabins. Walking

into the outer deck, they were greeted by yet another pleasant night without a single cloud in the sky, and a cool gentle breeze that softly blew.

"So, this was a date, huh?" Ash asked.

"Did you enjoy it?" Serena asked, eager to hear his opinion.

"I had a lot of fun, yes," Ash said. "Though..."

Serena tensed up. That didn't sound good. "Though...?"

"Well, given the way you and the other girls talked about it... I expected this to be... I don't know, more of a big deal?" Ash asked. "We had dinner together, we talked, we had a lot of fun. It's not that different from what we have done other times. The only difference is that this time it was just the two of us."

"That's how most dates are, really. Just two people who like each other doing things they like and having fun," Serena said.

"Sounds pretty simple to me," Ash said. Though his tone made it obvious he meant it as a good thing.

"Dates are also a way for two people who like each other to get to know each other better," Serena added. "Though in our case, with how long we've been traveling together, we know a lot about each other."

"Haha, true!" Ash agreed. "Though, no matter how long you've known somebody, you can always learn new things about them. For example, I never thought that you'd give Pokemon Leagues a chance!"

Serena giggled, but didn't say anything, and continued their walk in silence. The two of them then left the deck and entered the cabin's area, and after a few minutes, they reached their respective cabins.

"Thanks a lot for agreeing to do this, Ash," Serena said, as she stood next to her cabin's door. "I'll treasure the memory of this day forever."

"Hey, I had a great time too!" Ash stated. "And we can go on another date whenever you want."

"Maybe when we reach another town or city. The road is not a great place for dates," Serena said.

"Alright."

The two of them stood there, looking at each other awkwardly, as if they were waiting for the other to announce the official end of the date so they could go to sleep.

It was Serena who took the initiative, walked towards Ash, and much to his surprise, kissed him in the cheek. Her face flushing red, Serena quickly entered her cabin.

"Goodnight, Ash," she said, before closing the door with a gentle click, so as not to wake the others up.

Ash's hand went to the spot Serena had kissed, his own face heating up as well. A smile formed in his face, before entering his own cabin as well.

"Goodnight, Serena."

Author's Note: And that's Ash and Serena's first date! I hope you guys enjoyed it. And rest assured it will be far from the first one.

Yeah, Ash and Serena aren't going to refer to each other as boyfriend and girlfriend or kiss each other (at least in the lips, kisses on the cheek are fair game as shown here), since they still need to work a little on their fledging relationship before they can get to that point, and while Serena is ready for a

relationship of that level, Ash certainly isn't (but rest assured that he will get to that point eventually). But they won't act anymore as simply friends, since not only they will go on more dates, but act in a more affectionate way to each other befitting a couple, such as holding hands.

The part where Ash mentions that he had been thinking in redoing the Kanto Gyms is a reference to one of the ideas I had for this fic, with Ash redoing his Kanto Gym Challenge while Serena would still be doing contests. It would have included plotlines the original anime didn't adapt from the game, like the Celadon City Casino or the Silph co. invasion. In the end, I decided against the idea since to say that Kanto is far from uncharted territory would be a massive understatement, and I wanted to do something more original, so I choose to adapt a fangame instead, even if it would mean a much smaller audience.

Thanks a lot to 61394, Jake, Fox McCloud, MegaSalamence64, Galladeknight21, Brightnova169, hirowriter, Wangbu and Viroro-kun for reviewing last chapter, as well as special thanks to Viroro-kun for his awesome job as a betareader, whose suggestions and edits made this chapter so much better.

Make sure to drop a review, given that this chapter is pretty important for Ash and Serena's development for obvious reasons, and I'm dying to see your opinion on this chapter.

And with this the Tandor Cruise arc comes to an end! Next chapter... ALIENS! (if you know, you know)

Where No One Will Hear You Scream

Chapter 32:

Where No One Will Hear You Scream

Route 8 - The Wheatfields

Today it has been a day for goodbyes.

The cruise trip had been an enjoyable and very memorable experience, but like all good things, it came to an end when it reached the port of Route 8, also known as the Wheatfields.

And with the end of the cruise trip, two of their new friends split from the group: first, it was Lilia. Like the bespectacled girl had said before boarding the cruise, there was a yacht with the Orangics logo docked at the port, ready to take her back home, at least temporarily.

"It's a pity we have to say goodbye to each other after just meeting each other again," Clemont lamented.

"Don't worry, I will convince my dad to let me come back here. You'll see me sooner than you think," Lilia assured Clemont.

"At the very least, you enjoyed some time together on the cruise," Ash pointed out.

"Yeah..." Clemont said.

"Though, here's a little something for you before I leave, Clemont," Lilia said, as she walked towards him.

And the taller girl gave Clemont a kiss on the cheek, just like how Serena had done with Ash the night before. Serena and Leona gasped in surprise, but Bonnie merely crossed her arms and huffed irritably.

"L-Lilia... !" Clemont said, completely flustered, as his hand flew towards the kissed cheek.

"A goodbye kiss. And when we reunite again, we will celebrate with another one, right?" Lilia said, winking at Clemont, before walking towards her yacht. "Anyway, I better go! Have a safe journey!"

Lilia's wasn't the only departure. Despite having had a great time with them, Leona also decided to leave the group, saying that she preferred to travel on her own.

"Not that this is the last time we'll see each other!" the Alolan girl had said before leaving. "At the very least, we will meet again at the Grand Festival. Though if we meet each other before that, then the better! See you soon and good luck!"

So the group was once again back to Ash, Serena, Clemont and Bonnie. And all four of them were ready to continue their journey.

"East of here is Vinoville Town, which will hold a contest soon," Serena read from her tablet. "And with a good pace, we'll be able to arrive at least a day in advance before it begins! Plus, Vinoville Town also has a Pokemon Gym that Ash can challenge."

"In that case, to Vinoville Town then!" Ash enthusiastically agreed.

...

If there was one word that could describe Route 8, it was "rural".

Also named "The Wheatfields" for a reason obvious to those who set foot on such a part of Tandor, Route 8 was a vast expanse of farmland as far as the eye could see. It was mostly wheat, as the name implied, giving the route a yellow hue that contrasted nicely with the green of the scenery, but there were many other crops, such as corn, carrots, watermelons, potatoes, turnips, and many fruit trees and berry bushes.

"The Wheatfields produce the majority of the food consumed in Tandor, with a good chunk of it being imported to other regions," Serena read from her tablet, as the group walked through the farmlands. "There are also many people who raise and breed Mareep and Baaschaun for their milk and their wool."

"Whoa, I never imagined that Tandor had a place like this," Ash said, looking around. "Most people only talk about the power plants."

"Funny thing you mention that, since there's a Nuclear Plant to the north," Serena said, her voice growing a little less enthused.

"Let's avoid that part," Bonnie quickly said. "You said there are Mareep and Baaschaun? Where? I want to see them!"

"Pikapi!" Pikachu said, pointing somewhere in the distance.

Everybody looked where Pikachu was pointing, and saw a large patch of green grass with yellow and dark gray dots on it. Soft bleats could be heard coming from that place.

"Oh, there they are! Let's go!" Bonnie said, rushing forward.

"Nenene!" Dedenne cheered.

"Bonnie! Come on, those Pokemon aren't going anywhere!" Clemont complained, fearing another jog his unathletic body will be ill-suited for.

Fortunately for the inventor, Ash and Serena didn't follow Bonnie in her dash, walking towards the fenced area at the same pace they've been keeping so far. After a few minutes they finally reached the clearing that had many Mareep and Baashaun peacefully grazing. Bonnie was crouched next to a Mareep, happily ruffling its wool.

"Hehe, so fluffy..." the blond girl gushed.

"I remember saying that Baashaun are much more aggressive than Mareep," Ash pointed out. "But these ones look pretty chill, don't you

think?"

"Indeed," Serena agreed. "Looking at them, eating so peacefully... It makes me feel more relaxed."

"Maybe that's why people count Mareep when they can't sleep," Clemont added.

"Still, when trained properly, Mareep can be pretty strong fighters. We all saw them in battle," Ash said.

"Pi," Pikachu nodded.

"Then again, I doubt these Pokemon had any combat training. The website said that they're bred purely for their wool and milk," Serena pointed out.

"One way or another, they're super cute!" Bonnie gushed, seemingly putting an end to the discussion. "You know, if dad's Ampharos ever lays an egg, I'm going to ask him to-"

That moment, something burst from underground, and started to spew flames in every direction, scaring the Mareep and the Baashaun, who quickly ran away while letting out distressed bleats, including the one next to Bonnie, knocking the young girl on her back.

"Ouch!"

"Bonnie!" Clemont said, rushing to her aid. "Are you okay?"

"What's going on? Why are the Mareep and Baashaun so scared?" Serena asked, trying to make sense of the ensuing confusion.

"I think that's the culprit!" Ash said, pointing to something in front of the flock.

It was a Pokemon they had seen before: a small dark brown dinosaur with a red shell on his head and his back, and the tip of his

tail on fire.

"A Raptorch!" Serena said.

And indeed, it was a Raptorch, the same Pokemon Natalie had chosen as starter. But while Natalie's Raptorch was formal and obedient, no doubt thanks to the girl's training, this one appeared to be a hooligan who had fun by scaring the Mareep and the Baaschaun with his fire breath.

"Don't worry, I'll protect you!" Ash said to the fleeing flock, a pokeball already in his hand. "Aveden, I choose you!"

The capture device opened, and the Bliss Bird Pokemon appeared from a flash of light, already flying.

"Ave, ave!" Aveden chirped.

"Aveden, we need to protect those Mareep and Baaschaun from that Raptorch!" Ash told his first Tandorian Pokemon. "Air Cutter, Aveden!"

"Deeen!" Aveden chirped, strongly beating his wings to produce a pair of blades of compressed air that flew towards the Fire Dino Pokemon.

"Ra, rap!" Raptorch yipped as he gracefully dodged the attacks, the blades of air leaving a gash on the spot where they crashed.

Feeling it was his turn to attack, Raptorch built fire inside his mouth, before releasing it in the form of small fireballs towards Aveden.

"Deflect those with Gust!" Ash ordered.

"Av, av, aveeeee!" Aveden whistled, beating his wings to create a powerful gust of wind that not only extinguished the Fire-type attack, but it slammed into Raptorch, knocking him backwards.

"Yes! Well done Aveden! Now, Mirror Shot!" Ash followed.

"Veeeeeeee... !"

"To, tor rap!" Raptorch yipped in panic as it ran away before Aveden's next attack could strike, before using Dig to escape underground.

"Aw man, he got away," Ash lamented, looking at the hole in the ground Raptorch had left.

"At the very least, he's not bothering the Mareep and Baashaun anymore," Serena said, drifting her eyes towards the flock, which was being calmed down by Clemont and Bonnie.

"Unfortunately, the little bugger will come back," a new voice said. "Thanks for protecting my flock from that troublemaking lizard, though."

"Tan, tan!" something barked.

The voice came from a woman in her late forties, of average height and built. She had curly brown hair that fell down her back. She was wearing an orange shirt, a green ankle length skirt, and a brown apron over it.

The woman wasn't alone: a canine Pokemon trailed besides her. It looked like a Tancoon, only much bigger and fierce looking. It had the body of a lupine, with mostly brown fur, a black mask-like spot over its head and nose, black feet and black stripes across its body. It had three tails, two brown ones and the middle one being black.

Serena took her Pokedex to scan this new Pokemon.

"Tanscure, the Racoon Wolf Pokemon, and Tancoon's evolved form. Dark/Normal. In the wild Tanscure live in packs. They cooperate with their packmates to hunt for food and care for Tancoon."

"You're welcome, uh..." Ash began.

"Ripley. Helen Ripley. And this is my shepherd dog, Tanscure." The farmer, Ripley, introduced herself, while patting Tanscure on the head. She then looked at Ash's Aveden, hovering his trainer, and let out a whistle. "That little bird of yours packs quite the mean punch. You trained him?"

"Yeah! I caught him when he was a Birbie back in Lakeside View. He has won many battles since then," Ash proudly said. "I'm Ash Ketchum, by the way, and this is my buddy Pikachu!"

"Pikapi!" Pikachu greeted her.

Ripley, however, glared at him with her eyes narrowed. "Ash, you said? I once worked with a guy named like that. Biggest scumbag I ever met," the woman hissed, making the Kantonian trainer gulp. Then, she smiled and added. "But it would be stupid to judge all the people sharing his name by his actions, right?"

There were a few chuckles, as Ash sighed in relief as the tension it formed for a few seconds defused.

"My name's Serena. And those two over there are our friends Clemont and Bonnie," Serena said.

"I see," Ripley said, her eyes focusing on Serena, before turning towards Clemont and Bonnie. "And are all your friends trainers as well?"

"Well, I'm a Performer taking on Contests. And Bonnie is too young to be a trainer, but she takes care of a Dedenne," Serena explained.

"I see..." Ripley said, sounding as if her brain was cooking an idea. "Say, you did me a real solid by stopping that bugger from scaring my flock again, so how about if you stay for lunch? As a thank you."

"Oh, we don't want to impose..." Serena replied.

"You ain't imposing anything, girl! Plus, I assume you're going to Vinoville Town, right?" the middle aged woman asked. "There are no Pokemon Centers until you get there, and it will take you at least two more days of traveling until you get there."

"Well, if you insist, it would be rude to say no," Ash agreed.

"Great! Come everybody to my home! The cheese made with the milk of my Mareep and Baashaun has no equal!" Ripley happily said.

...

After a few minutes talking, they arrived at Ripley's house. It was a two story, wooden rural house, which looked rustic but very cozy. There was also a barn next to it.

"Rebecca, I'm home!" Ripley said upon opening the door, her Tanscure quickly scurried inside, leading the group into a small living room.

The house appeared to be smaller on the inside than on the outside, but it was just as cozy and welcoming. The floor was made of wood, with some rugs here and there. The walls were painted white, with many pictures hanging off them, most of them being of Ripley with a black haired man with a buzzcut dressed as a ranger, which the group assumed was her husband.

"My husband, Dwayne," Ripley said, confirming their guess, when she saw her guests looking at the many framed pictures with interest. "Unfortunately he's out a lot due to his job."

"Hey there, mom," a girl of Bonnie's age greeted her. She was wearing blue overalls over a pink, short sleeved shirt, and white sneakers. She had fuzzy, shoulder length brown hair with a pink bow on it. She was a little surprised when she saw the group. Held between her arms, was a Feleng, who eyed the newcomers curiously. "Oh, you brought some friends."

"Yup! They helped mom with that annoying lizard, so I decided that a little thank you was in order," Ripley explained. "Guys, this is my daughter, Rebecca. Becky, these Are Ash, Serena, Clemont, and Bonnie. They'll be having lunch with us today."

"I see. Hello, I'm Rebecca. Though most people here call me Becky," Rebecca, or Becky, said. She then held her little Feleng so they could see it. "And this is my Feleng. His name is Jonesy."

"I'm Bonnie! This is my Dedenne," Bonnie said, showing Dedenne to Becky. "His name is... , uh, Dedenne."

Becky left Jonesy on the ground, with Bonnie doing the same. The two small Pokemon scurried away, playfully chasing each other, with Ash's Pikachu joining them.

"So, you dealt with that Raptorch?" Becky asked.

"Well, Ash did. You should have seen it! That Raptorch never had a chance against Ash's awesome Aveden!" Bonnie cheered.

"Though, it managed to get away, so I wouldn't count if he'd be back," Ash pointed out.

"That Raptorch isn't too bad. He's just bored, and he doesn't know how to pass the time," Becky pointed out.

"If he's bored he better find a passtime better than bothering our cattle!" Ripley resoundingly stated. "Come on Becky, come help mom prepare the food."

"May I help you? I know a thing or two about cooking," Clemont offered. Though his friends knew that referring to his cooking ability as "knowing a thing or two" was him being excessively humble.

"Nope! Stay where you are! You're my guests and thus you'll be treated accordingly!" Ripley's tone didn't leave any room for discussion. "Come on Becky."

"Yes, mom."

...

An hour later, the group was having lunch at the house's dining room. Given Ripley's occupation, the food included many dairy products, such as cheeses and butters.

"Hope none of you guys are lactose intolerant!" she had said with a hearty chuckle as she served them the food. And lucky for all, none of them were.

"You know, Mrs. Ripley, those Baashaun out there look pretty tame. Every other Baashaun we've seen so far has been pretty combative," Clemont pointed out.

"Ah, you noticed, huh? Well, the secret is in the genes! Mareep are much more docile, so the key is to have them breed with Mareep exclusively! That way, you ensure the next generation of Baashaun are much more friendly!" Ripley proudly explained.

"So you're a Pokemon Breeder?" Ash asked.

"Yup! With an official certificate and everything!" the woman replied. "Don't look so surprised! What, you think we country folk are dumb hicks or what?"

"Oh no, I didn't mean that! In fact, I'm from a small town too!" Ash quickly replied, raising his hands defensively.

Ripley let out a chuckle. "Relax kid, I was just joking. All of you look too nice to be the kind of jerks who look other people down. Otherwise you wouldn't have moved so fast to keep my flock calm and deal with that pesky fire lizard."

"Has that Raptorch been causing you problems for a long time, Mrs. Ripley?" Serena asked. "By the way you and your daughter spoke of it, it seems to be the case."

"Indeed he's been. One day the little bugger showed up and began causing all sorts of trouble. Thankfully the guy is easy to scare," Ripley replied.

"Have you guys tried to capture it?" Ash asked. "Maybe that way he'd stop bothering you."

"You think I didn't try? But that Raptorch's too smart. Always attacks when no one's close, and runs away whenever I show up," Ripley said. "Hell, I was surprised he dared to attack my flock with you guys present. Guess either he didn't notice you or he didn't think you were a threat."

Then again, that lizard is small potatoes compared to what we have to deal with once a month," Ripley ominously said. "Which... forgive me for the deception, but I didn't bring you here just to thank you for scaring that Raptorch. I'd like you to help me to deal with this problem I have once per month."

"What happens once a month?" Serena asked.

"You're going to think that we're crazy but..." Ripley began. "Aliens."

"Aliens?" Clemont repeated, sounding skeptical.

Becky nodded quickly.

"Aliens! They come here every night of New Moon, and take away several Mareep and Baashaun!" Ripley said.

"That's awful!" Ash exclaimed.

"They show up a couple days later. But they look really scared and disoriented," Becky added.

"I get chills to imagine what those extraterrestrial freaks are doing to our cattle!" Ripley shouted.

"Aliens? Come on, let's be rational. I'm sure they're just normal robbers in disguise," Clemont said.

"If they're robbers, why do they let the Mareep and Baashaun back?" Becky asked.

"Plus, that's not the only thing they do," Ripley said, as she hurriedly left the dining room. She returned less than a minute later, holding several papers. "Look what they do in the crop fields!"

Ripley showed them the papers, which were pictures of the area's crops taken from above. Some of the crops were bent over, forming all sorts of weird symbols and shapes.

"Whoa," Bonnie said. "Do you know what they mean?"

"No idea. I consulted some so-called experts, but they snubbed me off. They think this is a publicity stunt," Ripley said, crossing her arms, and huffing. "Those city dwelling stuck ups, thinking we're a bunch of attention-seeking hillbillies!"

"Maybe they're trying to communicate with us..." Serena suggested.

"Then they should do it without attacking our cattle!" Ripley shouted. "Today's a New Moon, that means that those space thieves will be back for more! Please, help me defend our cattle from them!"

"Can we?" Bonnie asked, looking at her three friends. "Not only would we be doing a good deed, but we'd get to see aliens!"

"Aliens or not, I don't think we can leave anybody at the prey of cattle robbers," Ash stated.

"Can we see crops? Maybe we can find some clues there, and maybe some proof that might reveal who the true culprits are," Clemont requested.

"Sure thing. Becky will show you the way. I need to prepare the house for tonight," Ripley said.

...

A few minutes later, Becky, with Jonesy trailing her, led the group towards one of the wheat fields, specifically to one of the parts that had been pressed in order to make the strange symbols on the fields.

"Sooo..." Ash began, looking around at the bent over wheat stalks. "Do you guys see anything unusual?"

"What are we looking for to begin with?" Serena asked.

"I don't know... evidence the aliens might have left while doing this?" Ash suggested, though his voice lacked conviction. "I mean... whenever I see a movie or TV show about aliens, they always find some kind of evidence of their presence."

"That sounds like a good idea, but how can we do it?" Bonnie asked. In response, Clemont began to snicker as his glasses reflected the sunlight in an eerie way. The lemon blonde grimaced. "Oh no..."

"I'm glad you asked, little sister, because I have the perfect invention to help us with this! The future is now, thanks to science! Clemont Gear On!" Clemont said in a bombastic manner.

Clemont's Aipom Arm picked from his backpack the invention in question, and placed it in front of all to see, which looked like a mechanical Hoothoot with a small satellite dish on its head.

"Behold, the Hidden Clues Tracker and Analyzer!" Clemont said, patting the mechanical Hoothoot. "This invention of mine is able to locate and identify radiation footprints, heat footprints, actual footprints, and more! If those aliens were here, we will know!"

"Science is so amazing!" Ash gushed upon seeing the invention.

"Whoa..." Becky softly whispered.

"Word of advice, Becky. Don't stay too close to that," Bonnie curtly said, pulling the awed girl back. "Or else you're going to regret it."

Clemont held a large remote with a screen on it, and pressed a red button. "Alright, time to put this into action!"

The mechanical Hoothoot hummed to life, as it began to flutter around. Its glowing red eyes scanned every millimeter of the area the aliens had seemingly flattened in order to draw their strange symbols, as data began to appear on the remote's screen.

"Hmmm..." Clemont hummed as he studied the results on the screen.

"Do you find something, Clemont?" Serena asked.

"Yeah... residue of psychic energy... it's faint, but it's still here..." Clemont said. "That means that whoever did this, had psychic powers."

"So aliens had psychic powers?" Rebecca asked.

"It was more than likely a Psychic-type Pokemon," Clemont corrected her.

"What kind of Pokemon would be able to do this, then? It had to be a very powerful one!" Bonnie pointed out.

"Maybe there were several?" Clemont asked.

"So several Pokemon just agreed to come here and use their powers to draw weird symbols in the wheat?" Bonnie said, spreading her arms for added emphasis. "Sure, that makes more sense than aliens."

"Well, when you put it that way..." Ash began.

"Come on Ash, you aren't going to-" Clemont was interrupted when his remote beeped. He looked at the screen. "Hey, aside from

residual psychic energy, there's also residual heat... in fact... the heat signal is increasing! It's getting closer!"

That moment, there was a rustling sound coming from within the wheatfield, startling everybody. Something was coming their way. All the girls huddled around Ash, who stood his ground as his hand reached for Greninja's pokeball. The rustling sounds continued, until...

"Rap!"

Raptorch happily peeked his head out of the wheat plants.

Everybody groaned and gasped in relief.

"Hehe... I guess the heat that I picked was from him..." Clemont nervously chuckled.

"It was just that Raptorch. Way to give us a scare, big bro," Bonnie chastised Clemont.

"Let's hope he doesn't plan to cause anymore trouble," Serena said, not dropping her guard.

Raptorch walked out of the mass of wheat, and rather than attacking them, began to excitedly run circles around everybody, vigorously wagging his tail, while he looked at both the human and Pokemon with curious eyes.

"Raptorch's not a bad Pokemon. He's just bored here," Becky said again. "He doesn't know what to do, so he sometimes causes problems so somebody can pay him attention. I'd like mom to let me catch him, but not only I'm too young to be a trainer, and she doesn't even want to see him."

Then, Raptorch saw the mechanical Hoothoot, and quickly went to inspect it. Getting closer, he cautiously sniffed it. Cocking his head at the unfamiliar smell, it began to poke it repeatedly with his nuzzle.

"Wait, don't do that!" Clemont shouted, alarmed. "The Hidden Clues Tracker and Analyzer is very delicate!"

But Raptorch didn't listen, and not only did he continue poking it, but it tried to scratch it as well. Sparks began to jump out of it.

"I knew it! Everybody, run!" Bonnie said, grabbing Becky by the wrist and pulling her towards the crops of wheat.

"Frosulo, I choose you!" Ash said, tossing a pokeball forward.
"Frosulo, keep Raptorch away from that machine with String Shot!"

"Sulo!" Frosulo chirped, as the Ice Crystal Pokemon shot a sticky thread at Raptorch, which wrapped around his body, before the Bug and Ice-type Pokemon pulled the Tandorian starter backwards with deceptive force.

Raptorch's fall was cushioned by the many wheat plants around the area. Burning the sticky webbing with his fire breath, the Fire Dino Pokemon charged towards Ash and Frosulo while exhaling several small fireballs at them.

"Frosulo, Protect!" Ash ordered.

Frosulo's eyes glowed green, and a light barrier of the same color appeared between the Ice Crystal Pokemon and Raptorch, easily stopping the fire attack, much to the Fire and Ground-type Pokemon's confusion.

"Come on Raptorch, show me what you can do!" Ash challenged him, as Frosulo prepared for a heated battle.

And what Raptorch could do was run away when things didn't go the way he expected, as the Fire Dino Pokemon quickly turned around and disappeared within the wheat field.

"That Raptorch might be bored, but guess that you provide him with more 'fun' than he can handle," Serena commented.

"Maybe he doesn't know how to react when somebody challenges him," Ash guessed. "Return, Frosulo. Great work."

"Whew! Thank goodness it didn't explode," Clemont said, checking the mechanical Hoothoot. "It only has some minor damage that I can easily repair."

"It didn't explode?" Bonnie asked incredulously, as her head peeked from behind the wheatfield. "What kind of sorcery is this!?"

"Why are you disappointed that his invention didn't explode?" Becky asked, her head peeking above Bonnie's.

"It's a law of the universe," Bonnie stated.

"Alright, I think- huh?" Clemont asked, as he checked the tracker's screen. "More psychic energy! And it's coming from..." Clemont began to look around, trying to find the direction of the energy. "... that farmhouse!"

Everybody looked in the direction Clemont had pointed at, and there was indeed a farmhouse in the distance. Unlike the other farmhouses, though, it looked dilapidated, as if no one had taken care of it for a long time

"That place, who's living there?" Ash asked, wondering if another farmer might have been behind the attacks.

"No one," Becky said. "Mama said that that used to be the Hudsons' house, but after they died, well, nobody bought the property and it has been abandoned since then."

"In that case, I don't think anybody will mind if we go check it out," Clemont said.

...

Unfortunately, while Clemont found more traces of the same psychic signature, the abandoned farmhouse had nothing of interest.

After that, they spent an hour or so in the fields helping Clemont retrieve data from the so-called aliens, but other than more of the same strange psychic signature, they didn't find anything, so they decided to go back to Ripley's house. They found the woman outside, herding the flock of Mareep and Baashaun inside a large fenced enclosure with the help of her Tanscure. It reminded Ash of the one at Oak's Ranch.

"Ah, I see you're back," Ripley said, upon seeing the group back. "Did you find something useful out there?"

"Psychic signatures. Whoever did some symbols in the fields, it used some kind of psychic power. A Psychic-type Pokemon, more than likely," Clemont explained.

"Makes sense. Sometimes I see my cattle floating away in the air as if being lifted by an invisible force," Ripley replied. "At first I thought they were being abducted into their mothership, but guess that's how they carry them away."

Clemont let out a groan of exasperation at Ripley's insistence on the culprits being aliens, but didn't feel like getting into an argument.

"We also found that Raptorch, but he ran away when I challenged him to a battle," Ash added.

"Good. We don't need that troublemaker around for today," Ripley curtly stated, before locking the gate of the enclosure, not that it would do any good against the cattle robbers. She then looked into the west, the sun slowly setting in the horizon, making the middle aged woman frown. "Those extraterrestrial scoundrels will be here soon. Becky, get inside the house and don't get out until I say so."

"Bonnie, you should go with her," Clemont said.

"No fair! I want to see the aliens!" Bonnie protested, stomping on the ground with one foot. "Whenever something cool happens, I'm always told to go somewhere else."

"Bonnie, this is going to get dangerous! It's for your own sake!" Clemont insisted.

"Come on Bonnie. I have some games in the house that we can play with our Pokemon," Becky softly said.

"... fine," the blonde replied, letting the other girl lead her towards the farmhouse.

"I wish Bonnie was as obedient as Becky is," Clemont said, shaking his head, as he saw the two girls go. "Alright, now that we don't have to worry about them, I have a plan to battle those cattle robbers. First..."

...

An hour later, it was already night. With no moon to cast even the faintest of lights, the whole Wheatfields was covered in a thick blanket of darkness.

Unseen in the night sky, there was a man standing on what most people would think it was some sort of standing platform. Floating around him were dozens of small drone-like objects.

"It is time," the man simply said. "You know what to do."

And the unidentified flying objects moved towards Ripley's farm.

...

"Something's coming!" Clemont said.

Turns out the mechanical Hoothoot, aside from scanning surroundings for all kinds of traces and energy signatures, could also work as a radar. Clemont had tuned it to detect the same trace of the psychic signature that he had scanned in the wheat fields.

"How many of them, kid?" Ripley asked.

"Plenty. I'm counting up to twenty. And there may be more," Clemont said, gulping a little. The battle ahead was proving to be a tough one.

"How far are they?" Ash asked.

"Half a kilometer away, but approaching really fast!" Clemont said, looking at the screen on the back of the mechanical contraption.

"They'll be here in less than a minute!"

"Do you guys hear that?" Serena asked.

And indeed, perking up their ears, they could hear something akin to a low pitched whistle coming from above. Even if it was very dark, they could see multiple saucer-shaped figures against the night sky. Aliens or not, they were here.

"Two hundred meters... one hundred and fifty... one hundred... fifty meters... twenty five meters... !" Clemont frantically said.

"NOW!" Ash yelled. "Aveden, Flash!"

"Braixen, Fire Blast into the air!"

"Luxray, Discharge! Eletux, Charge Beam!" Clemont called, as he pressed a button on his backpack. "Heliolisk Lantern, activate!"

Aveden's body burst with white light, illuminating the night sky, helped by Braixen's wall of flames, Luxray and Eletux's electric attacks, and Clemont's own Heliolisk lantern, allowing them to see the mysterious objects that were approaching them.

"I knew it! Space invaders! Alien scum!" Ripley shouted. "You want my cattle to do your sick experiments on! Well come and get'em if you have guts!"

"Tanscure!" her Tanscure barked.

Because indeed, the host of strange creatures did resemble aliens: they had disk-shaped metallic bodies with a green head sticking out

of it. Said head only had a pair of black beady eyes, and two small stumps as ears. Two purple arms ended in three fingers dropped from their underside.

The creatures had stopped their advance when all the attacks came, and appeared to be confused, letting out more of those strange low pitched whistles, perhaps because they no longer had the cover of the dark, perhaps because they didn't find any resistance.

"Pi, pikachu!" Pikachu told Ash.

"Wait... are you telling me those creatures are Pokemon?" Ash asked, as he almost automatically pulled his Pokedex to scan them.

"S51, the UFO Pokemon. Psychic/Steel. A peculiar life-form that hovers above the ground with a mysterious force. Rumors say they came from outer space." The Pokedex explained.

"S51? What a weird name," Ash commented.

"A weird name for an even weirder Pokemon," Serena noted.

The moment of confusion and hesitation of the horde of S51 was short lived, as the UFO Pokemon moved to attack, launching a barrage of varied moves, such as Psybeam, Thunderbolt, Energy Ball, Shadow Ball and Flash Cannon.

"Braixen, Fire Blast! As big as you can!" Serena ordered.

"Aveden, use Gust on the Fire Blast to fan its flames!" Ash added.

Braixen aimed her ignited wand at the incoming barrage of attacks, before releasing a massive torrent of flames in the shape of the kanji for fire, while Aveden beat his wings, producing a powerful wind that made the Fire Blast's flames burn with more intensity. The two attacks clashed, and quality trumped over quantity as the enhanced Fire Blast easily plowed through the S51's attacks as it kept barreling towards them, forcing them to hurriedly disperse.

"Quickly Eletux, trap that group to your right with an Electro Web!" Clemont ordered.

"Tux, tux!" Eletux cried, as he fired an orb of yellow lightning from one of his tail bulbs.

The orb burst into an electrical net that trapped the cluster of S51, making them drop to the ground as they fruitlessly struggled to break it.

"Eletux, watch out! Above you!" Clemont cried.

The Hippocampus Pokemon looked upwards, and much to his mounting horror, saw a pair of S51 firing an Energy Ball towards him.

"LUXRAY!"

Fortunately for the Water and Electric-type, Luxray jumped above him, his whole body crackling with the electricity of Wild Charge, plowing through the Grass-type moves and smashing against the UFO Pokemon, sending them back reeling.

"Nice catch, Luxray!" Clemont praised his strongest Pokemon.

"Ele, eletux!" Eletux said to Luxray, who simply nodded in return.

As this battle happened, another group of S51 tried to flank the group and get to the cattle inside the enclosure. However, Ripley wasn't going to have any of it.

"Oh no, you won't! Tanscure, Roar!" the middle aged farmer ordered.

"GROOOOOOOOOOAAAARRR!" Tanscure bellowed, the power of its voice causing ripples in the air.

Upon hearing the bone-chilling roar, the group of UFO Pokemon lost all traces of resolve or bravery, and quickly flew away from them.

As the battle continued, it was made obvious that the S51 weren't going to make even a single dent on the makeshift defense that the three trainers and Ripley were putting up, and after glancing at each other, decided that a retreat was in order.

"Look, they're leaving!" Clemont pointed out in joy.

"Yes! We won!" Serena cheered.

"That will teach them not to harass peaceful farmers ever again," Ash said with a nod.

"Well, you guys proved to be an invaluable help," Ripley said, as she walked towards them. "So, I think a good reward for this would be-

"CLEMOOOOOOONT!" they heard Bonnie's scream

"MAMAAAAAaaaaa!" Becky yelled as well.

Looking in the direction of the house, both Ripley and Clemont paled upon seeing Bonnie and Becky being carried away into the air by a pair of S51, each of the UFO Pokemon grabbing the girls by an arm. The girls struggled against their captors, but in vain.

"NO! NOT MY DAUGHTER, YOU BITCHES!" Ripley yelled, as she ran towards the retreating S51.

"Bonnie!" Clemont yelled.

"Aveden, follow them and use Flash to mark their position!" Ash quickly ordered.

"Ave!" Aveden whistled in confirmation, as he followed the captured girls through the air.

"Come on, let's go!" Ash said, as he, Clemont and Serena returned their Pokemon and went to follow Ripley.

As they ran, they didn't notice that they had woken up a certain somebody from his sleep, as some plants began to rustle.

...

Aveden's various flashes of light proved to be an invaluable help to tracking the missing girls in the dead of the night. After ten minutes of running, they could see that they were heading towards another farmhouse. One that looked dilapidated.

"It's that abandoned farmhouse! They must be using it as a base," Ash pointed out. "Maybe that's why you found traces of psychic energies there, Clemont."

"Indeed. Being unoccupied, it makes it an ideal place for a base or a hideout," Clemont surmised.

"Did the attacks really come from this close, with us none the wiser?" Ripley asked.

"Maybe that's why all the attacks happened during new moons," Serena pointed out. "All this darkness makes it hard for anybody to see them coming."

Once they were close enough, Clemont activated his Heliolisk Lantern once, again, flooding the area with a bright yellow light. The many S51 hovering around the place quickly turned towards the source of light, and got ready to battle. They couldn't see either girl outside, so they guessed they were keeping them inside.

"I'll only say this once," Ash said, pokeball in hand. "Return Bonnie and Becky to us, right now! We aren't afraid to fight!"

Before Ash could make good on his threat, a laser beam fell from above, blasting the spot just in front of the teen, causing him to tumble backwards.

"Where did that come from?" Ash asked, looking upwards.

The answer came in the form of another flying saucer, or a creature looking like one.

"Is that guy the leader...?" Clemont asked.

The new threat also looked like an alien piloting a flying saucer. Except this one was much larger. Like the S51, its organic part was a green head with two pointy ears, an upside-down triangle mark that was a darker shade of green than the rest of its skin, and one eye blue and the other yellow. Unlike the S51, its head was covered by a glass dome, and the flying saucer it piloted was more complex, having both yellow stripes around the dome, and four lights of different colors at its bottom. Two large purple arms hung from its bottom, except these ones had four fingers instead of three, and yellow palms.

"Let me guess, you are another Pokemon, aren't you?" Ash asked, pulling out his Pokedex.

"S51-A, the UFO Pokemon, and S51's evolved form. Psychic/Steel. Some people suspect that Beheeyem, Clefable, and S51-A are conspiring to invade the planet. No one is safe!" the Pokedex said, the last line delivered in a dramatic way, in contrast to its usual emotionless exposition.

"I'd say the invasion had just begun," Ripley said.

"What do we do? We need to save Bonnie and Becky," Serena asked.

"I don't think they'll let us do that without a fight. I'll deal with the leader, you fight the others," Ash stated. "And when you find an opportunity, sneak into the house and save the girls. Metalynx, I choose you!"

"Braixen, go! You too, Pancham!" Serena said, sending her first two Pokemon to battle.

"Come out, Bunnelby and Elettix!" Clemont followed. "Let's keep the S51 away from Ash! If they behave like other Pokemon who live in groups, they will disperse if their leader is beaten!"

"We're counting on you, Ash!" Serena said.

"Leave it to me then! Come on Metaldyne, Energy Ball!" Ash ordered.

"Meta!" Metaldyne growled, as a sphere of green light formed in front of its jaws, much larger than when she was an Orchynx, before firing it at its enemy.

The triangle mark on S51-A's forehead began to glow with a multicolored light, before firing a beam of the same color, which phased through the glass dome, before blasting the Energy Ball to bits.

"Such a potent Psybeam..." Ash said in awe.

S51-A decided it was time to attack. Bringing its hands together, energy particles began to gather into a single orb of light, which then fired in the form of a light blue beam at Metaldyne, carving a furrow on the ground it touched.

Ash didn't know what kind of attack was that, but he didn't plan to find out.

"Dodge it!" Ash ordered. "And follow up with Iron Tail!"

"Lynx!" Metaldyne growled, as she sidestepped, letting the blue beam pass besides her, as her curved tail began to glow with a silvery sheen. The Armored Pokemon then leaped forward, delivering a powerful swipe at the glass dome, making S51-A to let out a buzz of pain.

"Well done!" Ash cheered. "Don't let it time to rest! Follow up with X-Scissors!"

"Meta, ly!" Metalynx growled, leaping at the UFO Pokemon once again, a yellowish-green aura coating both of her claws. "META-lynx?"

But much to her and her trainer's surprise, Metalynx's attack only hit thin air, as S51-A vanished right before their very eyes, dodging the attack, before reappearing behind her, and began to charge the unidentified beam attack it had used before.

"Metalynx, quickly, dodge it!" Ash called.

Metalynx tried to jump out of the way just as S51-A fired the attack, the beam being yellow now for some reason. Unfortunately for Armored Pokemon, she wasn't fast enough, and the attack hit her on her side, making her whine in pain.

Fortunately for her, though, the attack didn't appear to cause that much damage, given that Metalynx appeared to be not that harmed from the move, as she quickly recovered.

"Guess that could have been worse. Though we better not let that happen again," Ash said. He allowed himself a moment to look around and see how his friends were doing: Serena didn't seem to have a problem with her group of S51, being kept at bay thanks to Braixen's fire attacks and Pancham's Dark Pulses, while Clemont's Elettix and Bunnelby were also giving the horde of UFO Pokemon a hard time, aided by Ripley's Tanscure.

The moment Ash's sight returned to the battle, S51-A was reading another Psybeam. Ash didn't need to tell Metalynx to dodge it for the Grass and Steel-type feline to jump from the attack.

"Now, Energy Ball!" Ash ordered.

The Armored Pokemon fired another sphere of green energy, but once again, S51-A Teleported out of the way, quickly reappearing behind her, charging the same beam attack as before.

"Iron Tail!" Ash shouted.

Once again, Metalyx jumped into the air as her sickle-like tail glowed with a silvery light, ready to slash the UFO Pokemon with it. However, just as she was about to strike, S51-A vanished at the last second.

"Pika!?"

"What the...? It can use Teleport at the same time it prepares another attack!?" Ash asked in shock. He would have been genuinely impressed if it weren't for the current stakes.

S51-A reappeared behind Metalyx, and fired the unidentified attack, the beam being a vibrant red this time, hitting the Armored Pokemon squarely in the back. The feline's cry of pain was much louder this time around, as well as the explosion it produced. And indeed, when the smoke cleared, even if Metalyx wasn't knocked out just yet, the damage caused was much greater.

"Metalyx! Are you okay!?" Ash asked.

The Armored Pokemon was wincing in pain, but forced herself to get back to her feet. "Met..." she growled.

"What's with that attack? Metalyx took it before and it didn't cause her that much damage..." Ash surmised. "Perhaps the colors have something to do with it...?"

S51-A didn't look like it was willing to give Metalyx any time to breathe, the triangle mark on its forehead shining with a multicolored light as it prepared another Psybeam. She wouldn't have time to dodge.

"Counter that with an Energy Ball!" Ash called.

Metalyx opened her jaws, and hurriedly formed another green orb of power, just in time before the Psybeam was fired. Both attacks

clashed against each other, resulting in a small explosion. But when the smoke cleared, the UFO Pokemon was no longer there.

"Metalyx, behind you!" Ash shouted.

Metalyx turned around to see S51-A reappear before her, only to vanish once again, and teleport to another side. The UFO Pokemon continued to ceaselessly teleport around the Tandorian Starter, in an effort to confuse her, which unfortunately was not only working, but during the brief times it reappeared Ash could see it was preparing yet another beam attack.

"Metalyx, it's about to attack again!" Ash warned her.

"RAAAAAAAP!"

Almost out of nowhere, a fireball blitzed past Ash and slammed against S51-A just as it reappeared again, throwing it off balance and interrupting the attack before it had the chance to fully form.

Once it regained its bearings, S51-A's angrily clenched its fists as it stared at whatever had got in the way of its battle.

"Torch, tor!"

"It's that Raptorch!" Ash said in shock. "You... you helped us?"

"Ra, rap!" Raptorch vigorously nodded, before looking at the reeling S51-A.

"Heh... maybe you aren't as bad as you look," Ash said, chuckling a little. "Alright Metalyx, let's go! Time to save the girls!"

"Meta!"

"Rap!"

"Pikapi!"

The UFO Pokemon looked at the pair of enemies in front of it a little worried, but it didn't look like it was planning to surrender peacefully.

"I think that's enough," somebody said.

As soon as said new voice spoke, the battle came to a screeching halt, as the S51 and their leader stopped fighting. Everybody then turned in the direction of the voice. It was a glasses-wearing man who looked to be in his early thirties. The white, long sleeved shirt, blue tie and dark blue pants he was wearing made him look like some sort of office worker. He had dark spiky hair that flared upwards, with two white, lightning bolt-shaped streaks running through the sides.

But rather than the man's appearance, the most important part was that Bonnie and Becky were with him. Thankfully he didn't look like he was restraining them, and quickly ran towards the group as soon as the girls saw them.

"Clemont!" Bonnie said.

"Mama!" Becky shouted.

Both the inventor and the farmer forgot about everything else, and quickly greeted their sister and daughter, respectively, with a hug.

"Oh my Becky! I was so worried!" Ripley cried.

"Bonnie, are you okay? Did those weird Pokemon hurt you!?" Clemont worriedly asked.

"Nah, I'm fine. I don't think those guys would have dared to lay a finger on me," Bonnie nonchalantly boasted.

"Ahem," the glasses-wearing man cleared his throat as he began to walk towards the group. The S51 and the S51-A quickly began to hover around him as he walked, almost as if he was their leader. "First of all, I'm sorry to get you involved in my games. The S51 were

only supposed to kidnap a bunch of Mareep and Baashaun, but... well, guess they didn't want to return empty handed. Come on guys, you should know that kidnapping people is a no-no."

The S51 looked at the man bashfully. Some of them looked away and twiddled their fingers.

"Wait a minute... game? What game?" Ash asked.

"Are these Pokemon yours?" Serena asked.

"You were the one behind the cattle robberies!" Ripley accused.

"Yes, yes, aaaaaaaaand... yes, but not really," the man replied.

"Sure, I might have taken one or two, but they did come back to you, didn't they?"

"Just, who are you?" Clemont asked.

"Oh, right, I didn't introduce myself! Sorry, very sorry!" the man said.

"My name is Sheldon, and I'm Vinoville Town's Gym Leader!"

"A Gym Leader?" Ash immediately perked up.

"Some Gym Leader you are! Sending your Pokemon to steal other people's Pokemon and little girls!" Serena angrily chastised him.

"Yeah, like I said, I'm sorry for the little girls. My Pokemon taking them was an accident, and hopefully they have suffered no harm," Sheldon said.

"But you didn't apologize for stealing the Mareep and the Baashaun," Ash pointed out.

"Because I'm not sorry for that! And if it wasn't for my charade about aliens being blown up, I'd keep doing it!" Sheldon angrily said.

"But... why? Why do you feel the need to torment these good people?" Serena asked, now sounding more disappointed than

angry.

"Good people? More like boring people!" Sheldon shouted, throwing his hands in the air, as he began to pace around furiously. "This place, with nothing but farms and crops as far as the eye can see... I can't take it anymore! It drives me nuts! And the people! Nothing but dull hillbillies who can't talk about anything other than corn and craft beer!"

"If you dislike country people so much, nothing stops you from leaving this place, four eyes!" Ripley angrily yelled back.

"I would, if moving a Pokemon Gym to another town or city wasn't such a bureaucratic nightmare, not to mention the cost! And now that my entertainment in this wheat-filled hell has been busted, I don't know what I'm going to do!" Sheldon said. Then, his anger disappeared all of sudden as a realization dawned upon him.

"Though... how were you able to mount such a defense against my S51? It's not like the farmers here haven't tried before, and my Pokemon were always able to fool them. Hell, they believed they were aliens for real!"

"While we didn't have any evidence, I knew we were dealing with a group of Psychic-type Pokemon when I was able to track some residual psychic energy in the drawings on the fields-" Clemont began to explain.

"Whoa, there! You tracked psychic energy? How?" Sheldon asked disbelievingly.

"Oh, with my Hidden Clues Tracker and Analyzer!" Clemont proudly said, as he used his Aipom Arm to fish the mechanical Hoothoot from within his backpack. "This invention of mine is able to locate and identify radiation footprints, heat footprints, actual footprints, and more! And thanks to the data I gathered, plus all the information provided by Mrs. Ripley, I was able to draw a defense plan."

"You... you built that machine?" Sheldon asked.

"Yep, all me," Clemont replied, puffing his chest a little, clearly enjoying Sheldon's growing incredulity.

"I can't believe it... another man of science!" Sheldon cried, as his eyes began to swell with tears. He then rushed towards Clemont and grabbed him by the shoulders. "Where have you been all my life!? If I had somebody like you to talk and exchange ideas with, this rural hell would have been way more bearable!"

"Still, bored or not, what you did here not only was wrong, but highly irresponsible. Sure, Bonnie and Becky are fine, but they could have ended up hurt when they were kidnapped by your Pokemon," Serena said, still in the same chastising tone.

Sheldon sighed despondently. "I guess you're right, and I'll have to come up with a different hobby other than tricking these hicks into thinking that their lands are being attacked by extraterrestrials."

"You said you're a Gym Leader, right? Well, you might have some entertainment soon, since we were heading to Vinoville, and I was planning to challenge the Gym there for my fourth badge," Ash stated.

Sheldon adjusted his glasses as he looked at Ash. "Heh, look at that, a challenger! It's been a while since I had one of those! Not many trainers challenge me, you know! Since I'm among West Tandor's toughest Gym Leaders, and Vinoville is not that interesting to people outside rural tourists."

"Ha! You said that now, but Ash is going to wipe the floor with you! You'll see!" Bonnie said.

"Wait, Ash? Ash Ketchum? The same Ash Ketchum Maria and Davern have been talking about?" Sheldon said, sounding surprised, as he adjusted his glasses a second time. "Well, look at that! Not only do I get a challenger, but one against whom I can go all out! I thought that they were exaggerating, but you must be something

else if you were able to fight evenly against my S51-A! It's my strongest Pokemon, after all!"

"Yeah. I figured out it was way too strong for a wild Pokemon," Ash said. "It was beating Metalynx really badly. If it wasn't for Raptorch's help..."

"Rap, rap!" Raptorch happily yipped upon being acknowledged.

"That pest again! Doesn't he sleep or what?" Ripley groaned, rolling her eyes.

"What, do you hate Raptorch too?" Sheldon asked.

"Not all Raptorch, just this one! Always sneaking around, scaring away my cattle, breaking stuff!" Ripley complained, as she glared at the Fire Dino Pokemon, who happily wagged his tail.

"Raptorch isn't a bad Pokemon, mama. I think he's just bored," Becky interceded.

"So, is being bored an excuse to bother honest, hard working people like us? Ugh! Why don't you catch this Pokemon and take it with you, Sheldon? You're made for each other, it seems!" Ripley mockingly suggested.

"I would, if only to spare him having to deal with the likes of you, but it wasn't me this Pokemon helped," Sheldon said, looking at Ash.

"What, me?" Ash asked. He looked at Raptorch, and scratched his temple. "Yeah, he helped us against S51-A... but whenever I tried to battle him, he ran away!"

"My guess is that the farmers here chased him away, so that was his response whenever a human faced him," Sheldon said, placing a couple fingers under his chin. "But the fact that this Pokemon not only followed you, but helped you, is because he finds you intriguing, boy!"

"Yes. Raptorch could use a trainer that would put all that energy he has to good use," Becky agreed.

"If that's the case..." Ash said, turning towards Raptorch. "So, what do you say? Would you like to join my team?"

"Rap, raptorch!" Raptorch yipped, as he began to bounce up and down.

"Hehe, I'll take that as a yes!" Ash said, pulling out an empty pokeball. "Pokeball, go!"

Ash gently tossed the capture device at the Fire Dino Pokemon, who was turned into pure energy and sucked inside it. The pokeball fell to the grassy ground, and dinged without shaking even once. Smiling widely, Ash picked the pokeball.

"I caught a Raptorch!" Ash triumphantly cried, as he held the pokeball above him like a trophy.

"Pi-pikachu!" Pikachu cheered alongside his trainer.

"Well, I better leave. I'll be eagerly waiting for you to arrive at my Gym, Ash. Our battle shall be epic!" Sheldon said, as he sat on top of S51-A. "Let's go back home, guys."

And with that, the S51-A and the S51 all Teleported away, leaving the group alone with Ripley and Becky. The middle aged woman let out a weary sigh.

"I guess all's well that ends well, but I'm still angry," Ripley said, running a hand through her auburn hair. "Even if in the end there were no aliens and the culprit was that uptight nerd, you guys will always have my thanks for helping me so much."

"Don't sweat it!" Ash happily said.

"That's why I feel a little bad asking for one last favor," Ripley solemnly said.

"Well, if it's within my ability..."

Ripley's mouth then curved into a wide smile. "When the time to face that prick comes, give him quite the beatdown on my behalf, will you?"

Ash couldn't help but laugh. "Haha, I'll try!" he said, before letting out a loud yawn.

"Anyway, it's pretty late. How about if we go back to my house to get some shuteye, before you continue your journey, huh?" Ripley suggested.

"Sure. Today has been quite the rough day," Clemont said, with the rest of his friends agreeing.

And with that, the group and the Ripleys returned to the latter's house in order to get some sleep.

And as they walked, Ash couldn't help but touch the pokeball where his newest friend was resting, eager to see what the energetic Raptorch could do in battle.

Author's Note: And there goes Ripley's Sidequest.

For those of you who haven't played the game, there's a female NPC in a house on Route 8 who, if you talk her at night, will tell you about aliens messing with the crops, and asks you to deal with the alien leader. If you accept, you must do a stealth minigame avoiding the patrolling S-51 until you reach the leader, S-51A, and defeat it (sadly you can't catch it). After that, Sheldon shows up and reveals it was him who sent the S-51 to mess with the farmers because he was bored, and gives you a S-51 (the only way to obtain one outside Mystery Gift) as a reward for your strength. Though here, rather than a S-51, Ash got a Raptorch instead.

Speaking of which, given that some complaints about Ash only having 4 Tandorian mons and no main character catching a Raptorch, I hope this chapter helped to alleviate those complaints. Oh, this is going to be the very last capture chapter, so don't expect any of the main characters to catch more Pokemon. And before you ask how Ash can have 7 Pokemon at hand, remember that just like Clemont did with Dedenne, Ash sent Pikachu's empty pokeball to Oak's lab. That way he can have a party of six plus Pikachu. Some would call it cheating, but given that Pikachu doesn't fight for the time being, I feel it's fair.

While the sidequest was an obvious reference to the Alien Franchise, with the questgiver being named Ripley and dealing with alleged extraterrestrials (though oddly enough, the quest doesn't feature the Xenomite line, Uranium's own Xenomorph expy) I really had a lot of fun vastly expanding the Alien references, making Ripley's first name being "Helen", given her a daughter named Rebecca (which is Newt's true name), a husband named Dwayne that works in the closest thing Tandor has to a military, a feline Pokemon named Jonesy, and a bad past experience with somebody named Ash.

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Next chapter, our heroes continue their journey through the Wheatfields towards Vinoville Town, where Ash and Serena will try to win their next badge and ribbon, respectively. Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, and hope you have a great 2023! Also, do you know what it would be a great Christmas present? If you left a review on this chapter. Come on, it won't even cost you money! ;P

Doubts and Resolve

Author's Note: First of all, I want to wish you all a happy 2023. Hope you enjoy the first chapter of the new year!

Chapter 33:

Doubts and Resolve

Route 8 - The Wheatfields

It has been a day since their night adventure fighting what they believed were aliens. After spending another night at Ripley's, the group was ready to continue their journey to Vinoville Town. The middle aged woman was kind enough to fill their backpacks with all sorts of food typical of the area free of charge, as thanks for their help. After that, the foursome continued their trip through the vast farmland that was Route 8.

However, after spending the whole morning -and a good part of noon- walking, the group decided it was a good time for them to take a break, set up camp, have lunch, and let their Pokemon stretch their legs, and maybe do some training. Serena's next contest would be soon, and Ash had gotten a taste of what awaited him once he faced Sheldon.

"Flame Impact one more time, Raptorch! And Greninja, block with Water Shuriken!" Ash ordered.

"Rap, rap!" Raptorch happily yipped, as he dashed towards the Ninja Pokemon, his small body cloaked in flames.

Once it had built enough speed, Raptorch launched himself at Greninja, while the latter placed a large watery star between him and the living fireball that the Fire Dino Pokemon had turned into. The

clash of attacks produced a booming noise, while Raptorch was bounced backwards, but the Water Shuriken held.

"Very well, Raptorch!" Ash said. "Between that and Dig, I think your close combat options are pretty good!" Ash praised, much to the Fire Dino Pokemon's delight.

Given he was his most recent capture, Ash had been training with Raptorch for the better part of the morning, having him spar against his other Pokemon in order to gauge his level of strength and skill, which gave Ash a pretty good idea of where Raptorch was regarding his other Pokemon, what were his strengths, and what he should improve upon.

While still far less experienced than his other Pokemon for obvious reasons, Ash had faith that the Fire and Ground-type would catch up to the others in no time. He was full of energy, and was eager to learn from Ash.

"Now, I think we should work on your ranged options. Your Ember is okay, but I think you could do something better, like Flamethrower. Braixen here was kind enough to make a demonstration for you," Ash said, motioning to Serena's starter Pokemon next to him.

"Braixen, show him your Flamethrower!"

"Brai!" Braixen nodded, before taking a deep breath and exhaling a stream of flames from her mouth into the air. Ash appreciated that the Fox Pokemon had used her mouth instead of her wand to channel the Flamethrower, given that the latter was something Raptorch could not hope to emulate.

"Raaaaap..." Raptorch yipped, as he looked at the attack in awe with wide eyes.

"Thanks a lot, Braixen!" Ash said. Braixen nodded, and made her way to the spot where Serena and her other Pokemon were training. Ash then turned towards the Tandorian starter. "So, do you think you can do it?"

"Rap, torch, tor!" Raptorch vigorously nodded.

He then moved a few meters away from the others, and began to practice Flamethrower. Even if his first try only produced a shower of minuscule flames, Ash had faith that his newest Pokemon would be able to do it.

"Now that Raptorch has something to do, Greninja, I want you to train with Frosulo. Is that okay?" Ash asked.

Needless to say, Greninja obediently nodded, while Frosulo looked fired up at the Ninja Pokemon, as if eager to impress him.

With that done, Ash then moved to another spot in the clearing where Clemont and his Pokemon were. Chespin and Eletux were battling against Aveden and Dunsparce.

"Chespin, use Iron Head! Eletux, cover him with Charge Beam!" Ash could hear Clemont order.

Eletux fired a single yellow bolt at the Bliss Bird Pokemon, who countered it with Mirror Shot. As this happened, Chespin's green helmet-like part of his head shone with a silvery light, this time the glow keeping stable, as the Spiny Nut Pokemon launched himself headfirst at Aveden. Ash would have expected for Dunsparce to protect his partner, but instead, Dunsparce let Aveden take the Steel-type attack, while the Land Snake Pokemon rolled into a ball, and slammed into Eletux with Rollout.

"Ave!" Aveden angrily whistled. Obviously, the bird didn't appreciate being used as a distraction for the Land Snake Pokemon to attack freely. "Den, ave, aveden!"

"Parce," Dunsparce unapologetically said, rolling his eyes.

"Aveeeeeee!?" Aveden whistled loudly, as he looked almost ready to attack Dunsparce.

"Dunsparce, that wasn't very nice of you," Ash said, as he walked towards his two Pokemon. "The point of fighting alongside Aveden is for you to learn about teamwork. Rather than attacking Eletux, you should have defended Aveden from Chespin's attack, then the two of them could have attacked together."

"Duns," Dunsparce scoffed, looking aside.

Ash let out a sigh. "Listen Dunsparce, I know it was your home for your whole life but... we're no longer in Passage Cave. You don't have to fight purely for yourself anymore. That's the best part about having friends, you can rely on them to help you when you need them!"

Dunsparce made eye contact with Ash again, but he didn't say anything.

"So, will you make an effort to fight alongside Aveden without me having to direct you?" Ash gently asked. "Come on, do it and I'll ask Serena to make you some of her Razz berries Pokepuffs," the trainer smirked knowingly. "You might have tried to hide it from me, but I know they're your favorites~"

"Dun!?" Dunsparce asked in shock, as if surprised that Ash knew such a thing, though he quickly pushed his shock away.

"Paaaaaaarce..." Dunsparce despondently agreed, as if he was being asked to do a really big and bothersome favor.

"Great! I'm counting on you, Dunsparce!" Ash said, petting the Land Snake Pokemon on the head.

Now, all of his Pokemon were accounted for. Well, all of them except one. Ash could see Metalynx lazily resting under the shade of a nearby tree. Not that he wasn't planning to do nothing with her. In fact, she would undergo the most intense training of all his Pokemon today. Though, if everything went well, she would come out much stronger.

Though, before he crossed that bridge, the Pallet Town native felt that a long walk through the peaceful countryside could help clear his head a little. Though the boy also felt he could use some company. Walking towards the spot where Serena and her Pokemon were training -Bonnie was also there, looking at the spectacle-, seeing the Kalosian girl hard at work brought a smile to his face.

"Alright Braixen, keep the circles of flames stable!" Serena ordered. "Your turn, Pancham and Minicorn!"

"Cham pancham!" Pancham cried, while Minicorn neighed in agreement, as the duo raced towards the flames, jumping through the hoops with such skill, Ash couldn't help but feel marveled at such a display of skill.

"Really good there!" Ash said, clapping his hands.

Serena turned around, and beamed upon seeing her friend "Ash!" she shouted. "So, do you like it?"

"Yeah! It was amazing! I don't think even Ambrose could say anything bad about such a performance!" Ash praised.

"Heh, if only that were true..." Serena said, grabbing the hem of her skirt.

"So, three Pokemon?" Ash asked.

"I decided to practice some routines in case contests decide to throw a curveball at me," Serena explained. "And even if no such thing happens, well, it's a good way to practice teamwork and synchronicity."

"Indeed," Ash agreed.

"So, how about you and your Pokemon? Is your training going well?" Serena asked.

"Couldn't be better! Sheldon won't know what hit him!" Ash boasted, puffing his chest a little. He then deflated, and smiled sheepishly at Serena. "Though... I *miight* have promised Dunsparce that you'd make him some of your Razz berries pokepuffs he likes so much..."

Serena crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow. "Ash Ketchum, did you make a promise on my behalf? Really?"

"Maaaaaaybe...?" Ash replied, chuckling awkwardly. "Would you do it?"

The honey blonde smiled good naturedly at him. "Of course, Ash, You know you can ask me anything, especially if it's for your Pokemon," she then smirked, and added. "Though, why I'm not surprised that you need to bribe Dunsparce with food of all things so he can behave. He might be a scoundrel, but other than that, that Pokemon fits you so well!"

"Haha, true!" Ash laughed with her. "Anyway, I was going to go for a walk, and I wonder if you'd like to join me? I'd like to make it a date but... well, there isn't much to do here, is it?"

"A simple walk is okay, Ash. Just spending time with you is more than enough for me," Serena said, her cheeks tinged pink. She then turned at her Pokemon, and said: "Alright guys, good job! Take a break!"

"Hey, if you are leaving, can I brush your Pokemon?" Bonnie asked, a brush already in hand.

"You know you don't need to ask me that. Plus, all our Pokemon love it when you brush them," Serena reassured her.

"Yay! Come on everybody!" Bonnie cheered, as she skipped towards Serena's Pokemon.

Serena then turned towards Ash. "So, shall we go?"

"Sure!" the boy replied.

...

Boredom.

Lying on his back against the grass, his eyes fixed on the clouds above, this was all what Pikachu could feel at the moment. Utter, absolute, boredom.

Like his own trainer, Pikachu was somebody brimming with energy, and loved to train, the more the better. Sure, after his accident at the power plant he didn't feel as energetic as before, but he felt that Nurse Joy was exaggerating when she convinced Ash to bar him from anything that could be physically extenuating.

Even if he wasn't at one hundred percent -gathering and releasing electricity took much more effort, and in some cases it even hurt- Pikachu believed he could still do some light training. At the very least, to stay in shape. It would do him no good if he was finally given a clear bill of health only for his abilities to dull during the time he had been resting.

But Ash refused to listen to him. Of course, even if Pikachu knew that the human did it because he worried and cared about him, it didn't make the situation any better.

Then that was that awful medicine that Ash had to feed him a couple hours before lunchtime. He heard it was some kind of tonic that would accelerate his healing, but it tasted beyond terrible!

"Come on Pikachu, don't make this so difficult!" Ash had groaned, as he pushed the spoon with the disgusting liquid against his closed mouth.

"Pi, pikapi!" he had protested.

"Yes, I know it tastes bad! It's medicine, it's supposed to taste bad! In fact, the worse it tastes, the better it is!" Ash had insisted.

"Chu, pikachu!" Pikachu had countered.

"I know it doesn't make sense, but that's how it rolls! Now come on, open your mouth! Ahhhhh! Ahhhhh!" Ash had said, in a vain attempt to make Pikachu drink the liquid.

"You know Pikachu, if you don't want to take your medicine that way, Ash will have to inject it into your body instead, right?" Serena had asked, having heard Ash's struggle.

Pikachu looked at his trainer's mate, and paled. An injection!? No one said anything about that!

"What injection...?" Ash had asked, and luckily for him, Pikachu didn't see Serena winking at the boy. "Ohhhhh, right, the injection! Yes, I think I'll have to do that, given that Pikachu refuses to cooperate. I think I left it in my backpack. Could you please go and fetch it for me?"

Before Serena could reply, Pikachu had grabbed the spoon, shoved it inside his mouth, and forced himself to swallow the disgusting brew.

"See? Was it so bad?" Ash asked, gently patting his head. "Now stay here and try to relax."

And here he was, relaxing. Or trying to. He was too restless to do that.

"Raaaaap! Raaaaap!"

Looking to his right, Pikachu could see Raptorch, still trying to learn Flamethrower. Of course, doing it all wrong. The Fire Dino Pokemon was trying to force his Ember to be as big as possible, while the key to a Flamethrower was breathing. More specifically, deep breathing

in order to gather as much air inside your lungs in order to produce heat, which was then released in the form of a stream of fire.

Pikachu would know, he had seen many of Ash's Pokemon learn to use that attack.

Given that it was obvious that Raptorch wasn't any close to figuring that out, the Mouse Pokemon decided he could make himself useful and tell Raptorch the trick. Getting on his feet, he walked towards the newest member of Ash's team.

"Pi, pika, chupi, pika!" Pikachu told Raptorch.

"Rap?" Raptorch asked, tilting his head quizzically.

A prouder Pokemon would have taken offense at Pikachu's suggestion, because what would an Electric-type know about Fire-type moves? Thankfully, Raptorch was willing to listen, either because of his curiosity, or because he realized he wasn't making any progress.

So Pikachu explained it to him, and told him to try again following his instructions.

Raptorch took a breath so deep it was borderline comical, before opening his mouth, releasing a stream of flame. It wasn't still a true Flamethrower, but it was much better than his previous attempt.

"Rap!?" Raptorch asked if he even did that, before thanking Pikachu. "Tor, torch, rap!"

Pikachu nodded, and told the newest member of Ash team to continue training, before he returned to his resting spot.

His mood was a little better now. Maybe he couldn't be able to help Ash directly as he had done since they began their journey together, but he could still help him in other ways.

...

"Ah, this is such a nice place to relax, isn't it?" Serena asked, as she walked besides us. "There's so much green around us, the Pokemon are peaceful, the air is so clean..."

"I know! It reminds me of my own hometown!" Ash agreed. "Though, while Pallet is rural, we don't have that many farms around us. Also, when you hear people talk about this region, all you hear are the power plants and the big cities, but nobody talks about places like this."

"Eh, it tends to happen. People don't find the countryside all that interesting, you know? And prefer to move to the big cities, where the excitement is," Serena explained. "Even though I mostly started my journey to get away from the Rhyhorn racing training... Well, I felt Vaniville Town was becoming a bit too small for me..."

"I'm glad you like places like this, then. Given that there isn't much here to do that could be considered date-like..." Ash scratched his temple, as he began to look around, but only saw endless crops and Pokemon grazing.

"It's okay, Ash. I already told you that being with you is more than enough for me," Serena reassured him, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"Though, now that you mention it... when you left your home and came to seek me... it was because you liked me, right?" Ash asked.

Serena nodded, as she rubbed her arm sheepishly. "Y-Yeah... even if it wasn't the sole reason... I wanted to see you again, and... and return that handkerchief to you..."

"Heh, and I didn't even remember you..." Ash remembered, a little embarrassed.

"It's okay, Ash. It's been a long time, and I'm sure that I didn't make that big of an impression on you back then," Serena said. "I even bet I wasn't the only kid there you helped. Then again... you have no

idea how happy you made me when you invited me to join you, and Clemont and Bonnie. My journey through Kalos wouldn't have been even half as amazing as it was if I did it alone as I originally planned."

"I feel the same. Clemont and Bonnie are great, but without you... we would have missed so much..." Ash said.

Serena giggled. "And here we are now. Traveling through another region, the four of us. And you and me... on a date..."

"If we can call this a date..." Ash said, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Ash, I already told you not to stress about it. You don't need to take me to fancy restaurants or other typical date spots," Serena insisted. "I'm happy being with you."

"Still... I feel like I could do more. Try something to top our first date," Ash said.

Serena couldn't help but giggle loudly. "Ash, our first date was a romantic dinner on a luxury cruise. If you're able to top that..." she averted his gaze and blushed a little while gently grasping her blue ribbon. "... I'll have to ask you to marry me."

"Oh, okay then, I'll try not to go overboard, hehe," he chuckled awkwardly.

"You're doing fine, Ash. You don't need to worry about everything. Just keep being yourself. That's why I like you," she told him.

"Sorry if I'm a little nervous. This is pretty new to me and I don't want to screw things up," Ash replied, his eyes drifting away from her.

Serena raised an eyebrow and looked at her crush, a little worried over his demeanor.

"Ash," she began. "I hope I'm not making you uncomfortable with all this dating stuff."

"Oh, no, no, no!" Ash said, waving both hands for added emphasis. "It's great, really! Why would you think such a thing?"

"Well... I feel like you might be worrying too much about this and... I wonder how much you're doing this just because it's what I want," Serena said, before sighing a little. "You're nice like that, Ash."

"Oh, no, no!" He said again. "I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't want to! You're a great friend, Serena, and I'd like to see as well if we could be more than just friends..."

"I'm sensing a 'but' coming," Serena guessed.

"There's no 'but'. It's... well, I've never been afraid of the unknown. New regions, new Pokemon, new people, new adventures... that was part of the appeal of the journey, you know?" Ash began. "Then back in the cruise you told me about your feelings for me, and opened a completely new world to me that I wasn't even aware was there. But this new world... it's nothing like I did before, and I can't help but feel afraid if I'm doing anything wrong..."

Serena shook her head. She stopped walking, and Ash stopped beside her. The honey blonde then gently grabbed Ash by the shoulders, and fixed her blue eyes on his auburn ones.

"Ash, listen to me," Serena began. "Do you like spending time with me? Don't think as of now. Think before I confessed to you. Like in Kalos, for example."

"O-Of course! Didn't I make that clear?" Ash asked.

"Then it's fine, Ash. That's the only thing that matters. I enjoy your company, you enjoy mine, we have a nice time together. End of the story," she firmly stated. "That's all there's about it."

"You make it sound so simple..." Ash said.

"Because it is. And when the moment comes, whatever has to happen, it will happen. And if it doesn't happen..." Serena finally released Ash, as she turned her back at him, and grabbed the hem of her skirt. "At least we'll still have our memories and our friendship."

The two of them stood there, in complete silence, motionless. A gentle breeze blew past them, rustling the grass at their feet.

After a few seconds, Ash smiled, and broke the silence. "You're right, Serena. I can't believe I was worrying so much. In fact... by worrying so much I was worrying you, right?"

"A little," she admitted.

"In that case, let's consider this topic settled," Ash said. "Should we talk about something else?"

"Yeah, I think that's for the best," Serena agreed. "Is there anything you'd like to talk about?"

"Yeah. Something that's been on my mind recently, now that Orchynx has evolved into Metalynx," Ash said. His expression grew serious as he held the shuriken-shaped necklace that was holding the Keystone Vaeryn had given him. "I want to see how well Metalynx does with Mega Evolution."

Serena unconsciously looked at the keystone on the golden ring around her index finger, which reminded her that she'd have to tackle the issue if Selkid evolved.

"And are you worried it might not work?" Serena asked.

"Maybe not on the first try. But I have to do this sooner or later if I'm to challenge Vaeryn, given his condition to battle him again, so the sooner I do this, the better," Ash explained, before adding, "Plus, now that I have this I'd like to see if it's something I can rely on for my Gym battle with Sheldon. All Tandor leaders have a Pokemon

capable of Mega Evolving, so having something to match that other than Greninja would be nice."

"You already defeated Mega Evolved Pokemon before without him. Cali, for example," Serena pointed out.

Ash shook his head. "That's because it was a two versus one, given that I was able to knock out her second to last Pokemon, leaving her Gyarados alone. Plus one of the two Pokemon was Pikachu, and I can't have him fight for the time being."

"Korrina?" Serena asked.

"I guess you're right on that one. Though, I was lucky I was able to get to knock out two of her Pokemon while losing none, yet I still needed Fletchinder and Hawlucha to wear down her Mega Lucario for Pikachu to finish it off. Had I lost either of them, maybe I wouldn't have won," Ash said. "When I tried to fight her Mega Lucario with Pikachu, it never went well for us, and that's even before Lucario went berserk."

Indeed, the image of the deranged Aura Pokemon brutally beating Pikachu down was something the honey blonde would take a lot of time to forget.

"And you're worried that Metalynx might lose control?" Serena asked, before adding: "Remember the reason Korrina's Lucario lost control was due its aura overloading. I doubt Metalynx would have such a problem."

"True. Though, I still can't help but remember how much it took me to master Greninja's Battle Bond, even if in the end it was simpler than I first thought," Ash said, before resolve filled his very being. "This time, though, I'm not going to make the same mistakes, and only use Mega Evolution once I'm sure I have it completely under control."

"For all that's worth, I don't think you'd have any troubles with this. I'm sure your experiences with Greninja will also help you a lot with

this," Serena stated.

...

While Ash and Serena had their romantic walk and Clemont trained with his Pokemon -Chespin and Elettix had been given a rest, it was now Luxray and Bunnelby's turn- Bonnie was doing one of her favorite activities: brushing the group's Pokemon. Right now, she was grooming Serena's Pokemon, since their trainer didn't leave them anything to do in her absence, so they were resting.

The young girl had already done Braixen and Sylveon. It was now Pancham's turn, the Playful Pokemon sitting with his back turned at her, sunglasses removed so Bonnie could brush his head better.

"You're going to look so handsome for your next contest, Pancham, even that jerk of a judge will be amazed," Bonnie began.

"Chaaaaam..." Pancham cooed, enjoying the feeling of the brush against his fur.

"You're almost done..." Bonnie said, giving the last few brush strokes as she eyed her next 'customer'.

Selkid had no fur or hair she could brush, which only left Minicorn and Quetzoral. And once she was done with them, she'll work on her brother's Pokemon. Just because Clemont wasn't taking part in Gym battles or contests didn't mean that they didn't have to look their best, no sir!

"SYYYYYYLL!"

The young girl was startled by Sylveon's sudden screech of terror, as did Pancham. Did something happen to her? Alarmed, the lemon blonde looked at where Sylveon was: she was trembling and hiding behind Braixen. In front of them was Nucleon, who looked like he was trying to approach her, but Sylveon had panicked. And in fact, every time Nucleon tried to take a step towards her, Sylveon would

cry again, making the Atomic Pokemon to flinch and take a step back. Meanwhile, Braixen's sight shifted from one Eeveelution to the other, not knowing what to do.

"Pan, pancham, cham!" Pancham yelled at Nucleon. Bonnie didn't understand what the Playful Pokemon was saying, but given the tone she guessed Pancham was telling Nucleon to leave Sylveon alone.

In the end, Nucleon gave up, let out a sad, distorted whine, lowered his head, and walked away from Serena's Pokemon, finally allowing the Fairy-type to relax. Pancham then joined Braixen in comforting the still trembling Fairy-type.

Bonnie frowned. She wasn't the only one who noticed the way Sylveon reacted to her brother's first Tandorian Pokemon. Granted, while the Intertwining Pokemon was as receptive to the then-Eevee's advances as she was towards Chespin, the sheer terror she was feeling now... it made no sense.

If she was to reach the bottom of this mystery, she needed one special tool: the Pokemon Speech Translator. Thankfully, Ash hadn't taken his backpack, so the PST should still be there. Hopefully the boy wouldn't mind Bonnie borrowing it. Especially since it was for a good cause.

Device in hand, Bonnie walked towards Sylveon, who was now resting on the grass.

"Hey there, Sylveon!" Bonnie cheerfully said, careful not to spook the shaken Pokemon.

"Syl?" Sylveon asked, and tilted her head to the coming blonde.

"Say... would you mind if I talked to you?" Bonnie asked, holding the PST in front of her. "I'd like to ask you a couple things."

"Veon," Sylveon nodded.

"Alright," Bonnie said, switching the PST on and moving the microphone close to the Fairy-type's face. "Say, how are you, Sylveon? Do you feel better now?"

"Syl" [I'm feeling a little better now, thanks for caring.]

"I'm happy to hear that," Bonnie smiled. "Though... why do you react that way around Nucleon? You know he's your friend, right?"

That moment, Sylveon's demeanor changed, going back to how she was a minute ago. She rested her head above her front paws, as her body began to tremble.

"S-Syl, veon, sylveon!" [The monster... the monster will hurt me... it will hurt me...]

"But Nucleon isn't a monster! He's our friend! And he will never hurt any of us!" Bonnie protested.

"Veon, sylveon..." [The monster will hurt me... pain... so much pain...]

Bonnie tried a few more times, but she didn't get Sylveon to say anything else. Sighing in defeat, the girl decided to leave the Intertwining Pokemon alone, lest she made her more upset and got the rest of Serena's Pokemon mad at her.

Why was Sylveon so afraid of Nucleon? Was it because he was a Nuclear-type? Serena had told Bonnie that Sylveon got quite the beating from several Nuclear Pokemon, a Gyarados chief among them. That experience must have left Sylveon terrified of Nuclear types. It was like how Ash's Goodra, back when he was a Goomy, was afraid of Dedenne because of his previous traumatic experiences with other Fairy-types.

The memory made Bonnie scowl. It took Goodra a while to get over his fear, and she wasn't looking towards another similar experience with Sylveon.

As she walked away, she saw Nucleon lying under the shade of a tree. He appeared to be pretty depressed. If she couldn't get Sylveon to open up to Nucleon, at the very least she may comfort the latter, even if just a little.

"Heya, Nucleon! Do you mind some company?" Bonnie asked, as she plopped next to the depressed Nuclear-type.

"Nu." [Leave me alone].

Wordlessly, Bonnie began to gently pet the Atomic Pokemon on the head and down his neck. While his skin was very smooth to the touch, his body felt unusually warm.

"Nuc." [Okay, you can stay.]

"Heh, I knew it," Bonnie said, as she continued petting him in silence.

Though, after a couple minutes, Nucleon broke that silence.

"Nu, cleon, nu...?" [Why does she hate me? I tried to protect her... and now she hates me...]

"Just give her some time. I'm sure she'll come around to see what a great guy you are," Bonnie replied.

"Nucle, nucleon." [She thinks I'm a monster. Maybe I am one.]

"Don't say that!" Bonnie chided, as he petted him a little harder than intended. "You're not a monster, you hear me? You're a great, amazing and caring Pokemon! Or else my brother wouldn't have caught you!"

"Cle, nucleon." [That was when I was an Eevee.]

"So? You're still the same Pokemon on the inside," Bonnie said.

"Nucleon." [She doesn't think that. She thinks I'm going to hurt her.]

"Well, she's wrong, and sooner or later, she'll realize her mistake!" Bonnie confidently said. "This isn't the first time I see something like this. Sometime ago, another Pokemon of Ash was afraid of Dedenne, but in the end he realized he had nothing to be afraid of, and the two became really good friends!"

"Nu, cleon, nucleon, nu." [Maybe there is something to be afraid about me. Have you seen other Pokemon like me? They're mindless brutes that destroy everything they see. But they used to be normal, like I used to be. Maybe it's only a matter of time before I become like them.]

"Geige, geigero," the clicking voice of Geigeroach said, as the Radroach Pokemon walked towards the spot Bonnie and Nucleon were on.

"Huh? Geigeroach?" Bonnie asked, as the Bug and Nuclear type reached them. She then aimed the microphone at him. "Can you repeat that?"

"Geige, geigero." [I said that maybe the others used to be normal before the change made them lose their minds, but as somebody who had lived with the others for most of his life, I can tell you aren't like them. Even if you weren't born this way, you're like me.]

"Nu, cleon, nucleon," the Atomic Pokemon scoffed. [Does it matter? In the end, she think I'm like the others.]

Geigeroach sat beside Nucleon, and placed one of his arms on Nucleon's head, joining Bonnie in her petting.

"Roach, geigero." [If that's what she thinks, then perhaps she might not be deserving of you caring about her.]

Nucleon snapped his head towards the Radroach Pokemon, his three blue eyes narrowed at his fellow Nuclear-type in anger. Bonnie could swear that he was about to demand Geigeroach to take that back, but before he could open his mouth, his anger vanished as

quickly as it arrived, his floating ears dropping as he lowered his head once again.

"Geige, geigeroach." [Then again, she might just be scared by your change. Perhaps if you give her time to get used to your new self, she may treat you the same way as when you weren't like me.]

"Nu?" [You think so?]

"Roach, roach, geiero." [I'm not certain, but it's a possibility. But in the case she never grows to accept you, my advice would be to forget about her and seek others who do. Master Clemont accepted me, and so did the other members of his swarm, be human or Pokemon.]

And with that, Geigeroach got up and walked away, leaving Bonnie alone with Nucleon again.

"Don't worry. I'm sure Sylveon just needs some time," Bonnie sympathetically said, as she rubbed a comforting hand on Nucleon's neck.

But right now, Nucleon didn't look so sure.

...

Once Ash and Serena returned, Ash announced that he was going to try Mega Evolving Metallynx. Needless to say, this drew the attention of everybody in the group, human and Pokemon alike, as they dropped everything that they were doing in order to witness such an event.

Serena had crafted a yellow collar made of synthetic leather to act as the holder for the Mega Stone. On top of making it as sturdy as possible and to make sure that the Mega Stone would not fall out of it, she also made it so it would match the Armor Pokemon aesthetically as well.

The preparations were done: The group's strongest Pokemon -that's it, Greninja, Braixen and Luxray- were on standby and ready to act if things went south. Also, Bonnie still held the PST so they could understand how the process affected Metalynx.

"Above all else, stay calm. There's nothing to fear. You already saw this with Cali's Gyarados, remember?" Ash reassured the Grass and Steel-type Pokemon. "We're going to do the same with you now."

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu reassured her as well.

"Meta, metalynx," she purred affectionately, before licking Ash's face.

"Haha, I'll take that as you being ready," Ash laughed, as he wiped his face with one hand, and walked away from the Tandorian Starter. He then held the Shuriken necklace with one hand, and touched the Keystone with his index and middle finger of his other hand. "Alright Metalynx, let's do this, together! Mega evolve!"

Both the Keystone and Megastone glowed with a bright light, as beams of shining energy fired from each stone towards the other. The beams clashed in the middle, merging together, as Metalynx's own body shone with a bright white aura. As her body began to grow and change. Once the transformation was complete, the glowing aura disappeared as the Mega Evolution helix flashed in front of her.

"That's Metalynx? Whoa, she looks so cool!" Bonnie gushed.

"Nenene!" Dedenne agreed.

Metalynx's Mega Evolved form looked larger and way fiercer. The most noticeable changes were the long and sharp blades growing across her metallic legs, and her tail, previously shaped like a sickle, was now longer and straighter, almost looking like a huge machete. Other changes included the white tufts of hair at the side of her face growing into a lush mane and the two metallic fangs sticking out of her upper jaws.

"Metalynx?" Ash asked, as Bonnie switched the PST on and moved the microphone close to the Mega Evolved Pokemon.. "How are you feeling?"

"Lynx, meta, lynx!" she growled softly. [I'm feeling great! So much power! I feel like I could slice a mountain in two!]

"Heh, Mega Evolution didn't curb her confidence," Serena quipped.

"Alright then, let's see if you can back up that boast. Greninja, are you up for a spar?" Ash asked.

"Gre, ninja!" [Always, Master!]

The group spent the next hour putting Metalynx's new strength and power to test. While Metalynx wouldn't be splitting mountains anytime soon, her Iron Tail packed enough power to easily cut a tree trunk in half, her Energy Ball was noticeably larger than before, and her Metal Claw and X-Scissor had more range and edge.

Thanks to Braixen's attacks, everybody noticed that Metalynx developed an increased resistance to Fire-type moves. A quick check on the Pokedex revealed that her ability had changed from Battle Armor to Heatproof upon Mega Evolving.

While the memory of Korrina's Lucario going mad the first few times she tried to Mega Evolve, plus his own struggle with Greninja's Battle Bond made Ash a little nervous, as the time passed and Metalynx sparred against the other Pokemon, it was obvious that this wasn't going to be the case. Ash's bond with Metalynx, in combination with his experience with Greninja's bond made Mega Evolution something easy to master.

Seeing the results, Ash's slight but present uneasiness disappeared, replaced by both satisfaction, confidence, and eagerness to test this new power in a proper battle.

The match against Sheldon couldn't arrive soon enough.

Author's Note: Even if this was a pretty calm chapter, it was far from uneventful, don't you think?

Do you know something I hate that I see a lot in fanfiction? When two characters hook up mid story, but then the relationship dries up and just act like friends. Well, even if Ash and Serena haven't hooked up just yet (they're more than "just friends" but haven't reached "boyfriend and girlfriend" status yet) I'm going to make sure that every chapter has a moment between Ash and Serena that is unabiguosly romantic even if it's something as simple as a mere walk through the countryside. As long as the chapter's plot allows it, of course, don't expect such moments to appear on chapters with Gym Battles or contests.

I did promise you that even if Pikachu can't fight for the time being, he'd still find ways to help, didn't I? After all, Pikachu has been helping Ash train the Tandor team for quite some time (remember that it was him who taught Birbie how to properly use Gust and taught Orchynx how to use Iron Tail, among other things).

And Nucleon made another failed attempt at getting close to Sylveon. Oh well, at least he had Bonnie to console him and Geigeroach to offer him some needed wisdom. Don't worry buddy, don't let bad times get to you, everybody can see how awesome you are.

Thanks a lot to Ricardo Valencia, 61394, Jake, Nataliesecret, Fox McCloud, MegaSalamence64, hirowriter, Brightnova169 and Viroro-kun for reviewing the last chapter, as well as Viroro-kun for his awesome job as betareader, whose suggestions and edits made this chapter all the better.

Next time, Serena tries to win her fourth ribbon in a contest that will feature more than one surprise. In the meantime, don't forget to drop a review :)

Friends Today, Rivals Tomorrow

Chapter 34:

Friends Today, Rivals Tomorrow

The group continued their trek through the Wheatfields for the next couple days, making a stop here and there to rest and train their Pokemon. During the morning of the third day, they finally reached their destination, Vinoville Town. And just in time, given that the contest would take place there that very afternoon.

As usual, a sign welcomed them into the new town:

Welcome to Vinoville Town

A nostalgic paradise where all are welcome! Unless you hate farms or something.

Everybody had the feeling that that last line was aimed at a certain Gym Leader.

"Here we are! Vinoville Town!" Serena excitedly said, as she walked past the sign into the rural town.

Clemont adjusted his glasses as he looked around. "It's... not that different from the Wheatfields..."

Just like Clemont pointed out, Vinoville Town had the exact same look as the route they had traveled to get there: plenty of rural houses and farms, surrounded by fields of fruit trees and field crops of many kinds. The town only had dirt roads, with plenty of bushes and trees growing here and there, and a small river of blue crystalline water crossing it.

"Look! There's the Contest Hall!" Bonnie said, pointing at the colorful building in the middle of the town, which stood out among the

smaller houses made of simple wood.

"We still have some time until the contest. We should better go to the Pokemon Center first," Clemont suggested.

"Yeah. I want to make sure all my Pokemon are at their best to win our fourth ribbon!" Serena excitedly said.

They didn't take long to find the Pokemon Center either. While Vinoville was bigger than both Kevlar and Moki it was still easy to traverse, especially after having to deal with the streets of the sprawling metropolis that was Bealbeach City. Once there, they found something outside that they wouldn't expect to see in such a rural place: two dozen motorbikes parked in parallel next to the building.

"Those motorbikes... Does this mean...?" Ash began.

Serena's mouth curved into a wide smile as she rushed towards the center. "It has to be!"

The honey blonde ran past the automatic doors into the lobby of the center, her friends coming behind her. And indeed, sitting on several tables while doing a variety of activities such as reading a magazine, checking their pokegears or having a drink, were a bunch of bikers that the group knew very well, all of them wearing a sleeveless blue jacket with a Dunsparce on its back.

"Whoa, it's the Dunsparce Bikers!" Bonnie excitedly said.

Upon hearing their gang name, said bikers turned towards the newcomers, but quickly smiled once they recognized the group of four.

"Hey, look at that! Ash and his buddies!" Richard said, smiling widely as he got up from his seat, other bikers doing the same. "Long time no see, huh?"

"Serena!" Aisha happily said, as she walked towards her friend and rival. "It's so great to see you!"

"Same!" Serena replied, just as pleased to see the biker girl. "We haven't seen each other since Burole. How have you been doing since then?"

"It couldn't be better! Check this out!" Aisha said, as she reached inside her jacket, and showed Serena her ribbon case, with four ribbons on it. "Four ribbons already! This time I managed to shake off all the rust for good!"

Serena nodded, and showed Aisha her own ribbon case. "I might be lagging behind you, but that's even bigger motivation for me to win and catch up to you."

"I'm afraid that'll have to wait. Because when I win this contest, my place in the Grand Festival will be secured!" Aisha proudly boasted.

"You'll have to go through me first, though," Serena reminded her.

"Is that supposed to be a threat? Ha! The fact that you're here makes it even better!" Aisha confidently said. "I get to win my last ribbon *and* beat you in a long awaited rematch! What's there not to like?"

"How about the face you're going to make when Jillian announces my name as the winner?" Serena fired back.

The two girls angrily glared at each other, as their respective groups of friends grew uneasy due the building tension. Where did this animosity come from? Was the competition getting the best of them?

Then, Aisha snorted, Serena giggled, and the two of them broke into a fit of laughter. Everybody else quickly relaxed as the tension in the air vanished as quickly as it had formed.

"Heh, it's great to see you back, Serena," Aisha said, slapping the honey blonde on the back. "Though, I stand by what I said. I'm aiming for the win, and to meet you in battle."

"I'd be disappointed otherwise," Serena replied. "Given how much of a hard time you gave me when you returned to the contest scene after who knows how long out of it, I can't wait to see what you can do now that you're back in shape."

"Heh, you should have seen her in her last contest! She was spectacular!" Lou said. "We took so many pictures of her! Look, this is just before she won her fourth ribbon!"

The burly man showed Serena a picture in his Pokegear, with Ash, Clemont and Bonnie moving to see it too. Though, instead of seeing Aisha in her contest outfit commanding her Pokemon, it was the picture of a toddler sucking on a pacifier while riding a toy bike, wearing a pink long shirt with the words "Born to be Wild" stitched on it.

"Heh, is that you, Aisha? You were so *cute*," Bonnie snickered.

"Whoops! I think I chose the wrong picture folder..." Lou nervously said, as he began to fiddle with his Pokegear.

"Goddamit uncle, I'm going to shove that Pokegear where the sun doesn't shine!" Aisha said, as she angrily pushed Lou backwards.

"Where the sun doesn't shine? Where is that?" Bonnie asked Clemont.

"Eh... you'll know when you're older..." Clemont said, stammering a little.

Once Ash and his friends left their Pokemon with Nurse Joy for a checkup, they took a seat alongside the bikers, and spent the rest of the morning amiably chatting until it was lunchtime.

And once lunchtime was over, it was time for Serena and Aisha to take part in the Vinoville Contest.

...

As usual, Serena and Aisha left their respective group of friends at the queue for spectators, while the two coordinators entered the Contest Hall through a back door. Once inside, they were directed towards the changing rooms. Once Serena changed into her outfit, she was led towards the waiting area, where a few coordinators already were, waiting for the contest to begin.

Oddly enough, Aisha wasn't there, meaning that she was still getting changed. However, Serena was about to find out that Aisha wasn't going to be the only familiar face in the competition.

"Ah look, the Kalosian peasant. Just what I needed," an unpleasant voice said.

Serena turned towards the direction of said voice, and much to her annoyance she saw Sayaka, wearing her usual dark blue kimono with moon and star motifs, and her trademark smug smile adorning her face.

Serena let out a sigh of weariness. "And here I thought that this contest was going to be great..."

"Oh, it will be great, once I take the ribbon with me," Sayaka said. "Plus, as an added bonus, I get to stomp you into the ground again. Normally I wouldn't want to see the likes of you here, but after my unfair defeat at the cruise's contest, I need something more than victory to relieve my frustration."

"Unfair? You lost fair and square! The contest rules allow the use of Z-moves!" Serena snapped at her. Of course this girl would be a grudge holder on top of being a sore loser.

Sayaka's smug smile disappeared, and was replaced by a hateful scowl. She took a step towards Serena, getting into her personal space. "Listen here, you foreign hick. Not only was I going to win this year's Grand Festival, but I was going to do so without losing even once. And now, that part of my goal has been trounced. So you better watch your-"

"Is this girl bothering you, Serena?"

Sayaka turned around, and found herself facing Aisha, arms crossed and an expression that dared the ninja girl to try anything. Sayaka wasn't intimidated by the taller girl, and scanned her from head to toe, making a disgusted grimace.

"And who the hell are you supposed to be?" Sayaka asked.

"We're in a contest hall, inside the coordinator's waiting area. Can you take a guess?" Aisha snarked.

Sayaka once again scanned Aisha head to toe. Her grimace disappeared, while her smug smile returned in full force. "Oh, so you know that we're in a contest hall. Given your getup, I thought that you had gotten lost on your way to some punk den."

Aisha merely raised an eyebrow, but didn't seem to pay any mind to the insult. "Listen, girlie, as long as I'm here, you better not bother Serena, or any other coordinator for that matter, understood? Or else you will have to deal with me."

Sayaka narrowed her eyes at the biker. Serena was almost afraid that she might try to provoke Aisha into a fight, but much to her relief, the East Tandorian merely scoffed, turned around, and walked to another part of the waiting area. Serena could feel how the tension in the air dissipated now that the ninja girl wasn't present.

"What a lovely girl," Aisha snarked. "She seemed to know you. Have you met her before?"

"Unfortunately, yes. I had faced her a couple times in the past," Serena said, scowling a little. "And she always bested me."

"Really?" Aisha asked, her voice laced with surprise. She let out a whistle of admiration. "Wow, she has to be quite the tough cookie if you of all people have never been able to beat her."

"Yeah. She might have an attitude problem, but she's an extremely skilled coordinator. If you happen to face her, don't lower your guard for a single moment," Serena advised her.

"I wasn't planning to. Like I said before, I'm planning to leave this contest with my fifth ribbon, and sure as hell a girl with a rod on her butt which has its own rod up its butt isn't going to stop me," she declared, her voice full of resolve.

...

Meanwhile, in the audience, Ash, Clemont, Bonnie and the Dunsparce Gang Bikers had occupied their seats, this time the teens seated a row behind the bikers. Both groups made some small talk as they waited for the spectacle to begin. A few moments later, Jillian walked into the performance area, followed by the three usual judges. The murmurs and humming of the public died down as the spotlight focused on her. While the judges took their seats.

"Ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to the Vinoville Town Pokemon Contest! I'm your host, Jillian Meridian!" she began, and the crowd exploded into loud cheers. "Thank you! Also give a warm welcome to the judges that will evaluate our wonderful coordinators: Vinoville Town's own Nurse Joy, the Venesi City Gym Leader Rosalind, and the S-Class connoisseur Ambrose Reigns!"

As per usual, the Nurse and the Gym Leader got quite the ovation, while all the connoisseur got was booing. Not that the man paid them any mind.

Jillian then went to explain the rules of the Pokemon Contests for those in the public not aware of them, and then showed the ribbon the contest winner would take with him or her.

"Also, our coordinators should be ready for a little surprise, because unlike other contests, this one has a little twist that will be explained right now!"

A cacophony of mutterings came from the audience in response to Jillian's last announcement, clearly intrigued by what it could be. Most people welcomed anything that would spice a contest up, though others were a little worried.

"A surprise? Let's hope Serena can weather whatever it is," Clemont said.

"Don't worry. Serena can handle anything any contest may throw at her," Ash said confidently.

"And our Aisha is no slouch either. Whatever it is, she'll blaze through it!" Amber stated, her voice full of pride for her fellow biker.

...

Meanwhile, at the waiting area, the coordinators were also listening to Jillian with rapt attention.

"Oh, right! They said there was going to be a twist on the second round!" Serena said.

"Eh, whatever it is, I'm not afraid. And you shouldn't be either," Aisha said, patting Serena in the back.

"First of all, we'd like to reveal that, unlike pretty much any other contest, this one won't have just one ribbon as a prize, but TWO ribbons!" Jillian excitedly announced, and the crowd began to hum. "You hear it, folks! This contest will have not one, but two winners!"

"So, the two who make it to the final round will win? Lame," Sayaka said, crossing her arms. She then looked at Serena, and grinned wickedly. "Guess if you're lucky enough not to face me until we reach the finals, you might leave with a ribbon today."

"Don't listen to her, Serena," Aisha advised. "She's trying to get inside your head."

"I know. But sometimes she's hard to ignore," Serena replied.

"But why are we giving two ribbons instead of the usual one? Well, there's the reason!" Jillian said.

Then, the words TAG TEAM BATTLE appeared on the screen in bold, capital letters against a background that flashed with every color.

...

The public began to murmur and chatter upon seeing those three words appearing on the main screen.

"A Tag Team Battle! This contest won't test coordinators individually, but will instead make them show how well they do in a team fight!" Jillian explained. "As for the teams, the eight coordinators themselves can form teams the way they so choose! There will be an hour of intermission after the first round in order to let them time to form teams and discuss strategies. But now, let the Appeal Round begin!"

Coordinators walked in and out of the arena one after the other, their Pokemon doing all sort of tricks, light shows, dances and acrobatics. Some were good, others not so much. Rosalind and Nurse Joy often passed a positive judgment, while Ambrose completely tore down the coordinators' display with brutal verbal beatdowns. Even if the shock value was lost after the first contest, his harsh words drew more than one coordinator to tears.

"Let's welcome with a big applause to our next coordinator! From Tsukinami Village, Sayaka!" Jillian said, as the kimono-wearing girl walked into the performance with a confident stride.

"That girl again? Ugh!" Bonnie groaned, crossing her arms.

"You know her?" Richard asked.

"She's a rival of Serena. We've encountered her multiple times. Very arrogant and rude, but with the skill to back that up," Clemont explained, as he adjusted his glasses. "So far, Serena has never been able to beat her."

"This will be the day she does," Ash stated.

"Misdreavus, Shrimputy, heed my call!" Sayaka said, tossing two pokeball forward.

From the first pokeball, among dark purple clouds and what appeared to be restless spirits, the Screech Pokemon appeared. From the second ball, among a twister of torrential water, emerged a Pokemon that neither Ash nor the Lumiose siblings have seen before: a small blue shrimp with big yellow eyes, a brown cowboy hat, four red legs, with one arm ending on a claw and the other on a twin-barreled gun.

"So, Sayaka has a new Pokemon," Ash said, pulling out his Pokedex to scan it.

" Shrimputy, the Gunsliger Pokemon. Water/Fire. It is able to fire a barrage of superheated blasts from its cannon. Despite its small size, it is a very capable predator," the Pokedex explained.

"Sounds like a tough Pokemon," Clemont observed.

"Alright Misdreavus, begin shooting Shadow Balls into the air, and Shrimputy, blow them up with Flame Burst!" Sayaka ordered.

"Mis!"

"Shri!"

Misdreavus began to move around the battlefield and shoot Shadow Balls in random directions, while Shrimputy destroyed them with fireballs shot from its organic cannon with pinpoint accuracy, resulting in an explosion of flame and darkness every time a Shadow Ball was destroyed.

"And Sayaka delights us with a clay shot, courtesy of her Shrimputy's flawless accuracy!" Jillian commented, as the public began to cheer on the ninja coordinator. "But is this all she has to offer?"

"The answer to that question is obviously no. Now Misdreavus, create a new Shadow Ball, but keep it close to you! And Shrimputy, Lock-On on the Shadow Ball!"

As the Screech Pokemon created yet another Shadow Ball, Shrimputy aimed at it with one eye closed. A red crosshair appeared on the Ghost-type attack.

"Now Misdreavus, fly around the area with the Shadow Ball! And Shrimputy, alternate between Flame Burst and Octazooka!"

Misdreavus did what it was told, and began to move in circles around the battleground, while Shrimputy fired missiles of water and fire, which chased after Misdreavus and its Shadow Ball as if they were alive. In no time, there was a veritable swarm of globs of water and orbs of fire flying around the arena. To say the public was in awe would be underselling it.

"Now, for the big finale! Misdreavus, stop those attacks and your own Shadow Ball with Psychic, and spread the former around the latter!"

"Miiiiiii... !" Misdreavus chanted as its eyes glowed pink, as an aura of the same color appeared around the Shadow Ball, the Flame

Bursts and the Octazookas, freezing them on the spot, before the Screech Pokemon arranged them in the way its trainer requested.

"Now, release!" Sayaka ordered.

Misdreavus complied, and the fire and water missiles, drawn by Lock-On, barreled towards the Shadow Ball. The resulting clash of attacks produced a spectacular display of fireworks that lit the entire stage.

The public went wild with cheers and applause.

"And once again, Sayaka amazes the public with her skilled performances! Now let's see what our judges think!" Jillian said, as the spotlight fell on the judges.

"An amazing performance. I love the clever use of Lock-On to direct those attacks. It shows a lot of imagination on Sayaka's part," Nurse Joy praised.

"That display was eccellente! Not just because of the visual aspect, but all the technique behind it!" Rosalind stated.

"This is like the fifth performance today that has some kind of fireworks on it, and the billionth one I see this contest season. Don't any of you people have any creativity?" Ambrose asked.

This time, Sayaka bit her tongue, recalled her Pokemon, and left the stage with a confident stride.

"Thank you Sayaka for yet another stunning performance!" Jillian said once the Tsukinami Village native was no longer in the scene. "Our next coordinator has quite the high bar to clear, but she isn't somebody to fold in the face of adversity! From Kevlar Town, Aisha of the Dunsparce Gang!"

The public broke into an applause, the members of the Dunsparce Gang cheering so loud they could be heard among the crowd, as

their youngest member made her way into the stage, waving at the public.

Aisha unclipped two pokeballs from her belt, and tossed them forward. "Alright, Dunsparce, Chimical, gear up!"

From the first pokeball emerged the one Pokemon all members of her gang owned among a storm of golden stars. A tornado of flames poured from the second pokeball, and from it emerged a Pokemon neither Ash nor his friends had seen before: a cute red feline with a small body and huge, adorable purple eyes. It had a pair of tiny purple wings on its back with a white spot in the middle of them, and a green snake for a tail.

"Whoa! That Pokemon is so cute!" Bonnie gushed.

"So Sayaka isn't the only one with something new," Ash said, as he scanned the new Pokemon with his Pokedex.

"Chimical, the Chimera Pokemon. Fire/Poison. A Pokémon said to be the product of genetic testing. The white spot on its back is its weak point," the Pokedex said.

"Alright Dunsparce, begin with Blizzard!" Aisha ordered.

The Land Snake Pokemon took a deep breath, before releasing a powerful gust of frigid wind towards the center of the stage, forming a rather large block of ice.

"Great! Now comes the difficult part, but we can do it! Remember all the training we've done! Chimical, Flamethrower, and Dunsparce, Thunderbolt!" the biker ordered.

Chimical and Dunsparce began to move around the block of ice and began to pelt it with the ordered attacks. People noticed they weren't just attacking at random, and realized the two Pokemon were actually carving a statue with the ice. A statue of Aisha making a pose, with Dunsparce and Chimical standing beside her.

"Great! Now Chimical, Sunny Day, and Dunsparce, get on top of the statue and fire another Blizzard, this time upwards!" Aisha ordered.

"Chiiiii..." Chimical growled, as its body glowed with an orange light, as it conjured an artificial sun above the stage.

Meanwhile, Dunsparce crawled Aisha's ice statue until it reached the head, and blew a Blizzard into the air, resulting in a slow rain of ice and snow that gleamed with the strong sunlight coming from above.

"And finish!" Aisha said.

Once again the public broke into applause and cheers, those from the Dunsparce Gang members being the loudest and easiest to hear.

"Aisha's unconventional performance captured the audience's heart! But are the judges just as impressed? Let's hear them out!" Jillian said.

"The beginning might have been a bit slow, but I feel that the payoff made it really worth it!" Nurse Joy said.

"Magnifico! It truly shows the artistic side of Pokemon Contests!" Rosalind praised with her usual gusto.

"So you had your Pokemon make a statue of yourself. Your back must hurt while carrying such a big ego," Ambrose said with his usual overly critical and mocking tone.

Like Sayaka before her, Aisha didn't say anything. She just returned her Pokemon, made a small bow towards the judges, and left the stage without uttering a word, while Jillian announced the next coordinator.

A few more coordinators came and went into the stage before it was Serena's turn.

"Let's give the next coordinator the warm welcome she deserves! Serena from Vaniville Town in Kalos!" Jillian announced.

"Wooooooohoooo! Go Serena!" Bonnie cheered.

"Do your best!" Clemont followed.

"Show them how awesome you and your Pokemon are!" Ash shouted.

By the time she reached the edge of the stage, Serena already had her two chosen pokeball in hand, which she tossed them forward.

"Braixen, Minicorn, go!"

The first pokeball unleashed a torrent of roaring red and orange flames, which coalesced into the form of the Fox Pokemon, while the second pokeball generated a pink tornado, revealing Minicorn once it dispelled.

"Alright Braixen, Flamethrower in the form of rings!" Serena commanded. "Mincorn, you know what to do next!"

"Brail!" Braixen nodded, as she began to draw circles in the air with her ignited wand, before letting them float away.

Mincorn neighed, before galloping towards the incoming rings of flame, and jumped through them with skill and grace, not getting a single hair on her mane singed.

"More fire rings, second version! And Minicorn, use Fairy Wind to propel yourself!" Serena ordered.

Braixen continued making more fire rings with Flamethrower, except this time they floated much higher into the air. Meanwhile, Minicorn's horn glowed with a pink light, and waving it like a wand she summoned a gust of sparkly pink wind around her that launched her into the air, expertly passing through the fire hoops.

"Let's wrap this up! Braixen, fire rings, final version! And Minicorn, launch yourself into the air again!" Serena said.

Once again, Minicorn used Fairy Wind to launch herself into the air, while Braixen moved below her, and began to wave her wand in circles, making hoops of fire progressively bigger, almost forming a cone. Once Minicorn reached the highest attitude, she dived back through the increasingly smaller fire rings.

"And Charge Beam into the ground!" Serena said.

Minicorn's horn crackled with yellow electricity, as it fired a single lightning bolt from it downwards. The lightning bolt produced an electric explosion once it touched the ground, which spread electricity towards the rings of fire, making them pop like fireworks.

"And finish!" Serena said.

The public broke into a wild applause.

"A performance being equal parts risk, spectacle, and acrobatics which had the public enthralled until the last second!" Jillian praised.
"Now let's see what our judges think!"

"An incredible performance! I was holding my breath the whole time!" Nurse Joy gushed.

"That little puledra was both skilled and adorable, and Braixen's control of her fire was flawless!" Rosalind praised.

"Just because you used an equine doesn't mean you have to stick to such obvious tricks. And I see that your Braixen can't still learn to use more than one move," Ambrose said.

"Thank you," Serena courtly said, before recalling Briaxen and Minicorn, and walked back to the waiting area with both grace and dignity.

...

Once Serena returned to the Coordinator's Room, she and Aisha watched the remaining few Appeal rounds together, until it was time to announce the eight coordinators who would pass to the Contest Battle round.

"And thus the Appeal Round comes to a close! We had an amazing selection of coordinators and Pokemon today, but alas, only eight can make it to the battle round!" Jillian announced. "And these are the eight coordinators with the highest scores!"

Serena held her breath as the pictures of the finalists began to appear one by one on the screen. She couldn't help but feel a little annoyed to see Sayaka's smug smiling face in the first position. Aisha was third, while Serena was sixth. Despite being lower on the scoreboard than usual, the honey blonde was thankful for passing.

"Yes! We did it, Serena! Battle round, here I come!" Aisha said, effusively hugging Serena with one arm.

"As I explained before, the Contest Battle rounds will begin in an hour. The finalists may use this time to choose their partner and discuss strategies!" Jillian said.

Serena already knew whom she wanted to form a team with. She was hoping her teammate didn't prefer beating her either.

"Hey Aisha," Serena said, turning at the taller girl. "Given that we know each other... would you like to team up with me?"

Much to her relief, the biker smiled. "Heh, I'm glad you asked. Sure thing, Serena."

"Really? Because that's a relief!" Serena replied.

"What, did you really think I'd turn you down?" Aisha asked.

"Well... you were really eager to have that rematch against me, so I thought..." Serena sheepishly said, looking at her feet.

Aisha placed a hand on Serena's shoulder. "Sooner or later, we will have that rematch. If not here, then it will be at the Grand Festival. I'm not in a hurry," Aisha said, before taking a furtive look at Sayaka, who was talking to another coordinator. "Right now, I feel more like putting that arrogant, stuck up hussy in her place."

"So we're a team then? Great!" Serena cheered.

"Yeah. Though... now that I think about it... Serena, do you have the jackets we gave you and your friends that time in Kevlar?" Aisha asked.

"Sure. Why?"

"Oh nothing. I just had an idea of getting matching looks. Come on," Aisha then grabbed Serena by the wrist and pulled her back to the changing room. "I only have an hour, but I think I can work something in that time."

"Wait! What are you talking about?"

But Serena got no answer.

...

An hour passed, and the four tag teams were shown on the stage's main screen. The fact that Serena and Aisha had teamed up was of no surprise to either Ash and the Lumiose siblings or the Dunsparce Gang. Sayaka had teamed up with some redheaded girl in a green dress named Lia.

Aside from the Tag Team format, each coordinator had to use a different Pokemon on each round. The first battle of the first round pitted Sayaka and her partner Lia against a pair of coordinators whose names Ash hadn't paid any attention to. Both Sayaka and Lia had used Pokemon that, while he had never seen before, they were familiar with.

The first one was a rabbit-like Pokemon with a gray body, green legs, ears, snout and circular marks over his always closed eyes, a massive green tail that curled at the end, and a golden band around its neck.

"Luxor, the Fortune Pokemon, and Luxi's evolution. Dragon/Fairy. It polishes its jade tail until it glimmers with lustrous sheen. A clipping of this Pokémon's hair is said to bring good luck for 30 days," the Pokedex explained.

Ash remembered Sayaka using a Luxi during the Appeal round at the Kevlar Town Contest. It wasn't odd that after all this time, it had evolved.

Lia's Pokemon, meanwhile reminded Ash of a Marowak, except it had purple skin, and a much terrifying appearance: its right hand and leg were a hook and a peg-leg, respectively, was wearing a ragged red scarf around its neck, and there were bones sticking out of its back.

"Skelerogue, the First Mate Pokemon and Swabone's evolution. Ghost/Fighting. It requires seemingly no sustenance such as food or air. Although it can't swim, it will walk across the bottom of the sea until it makes it to shore." the Pokedex said.

Their opponents sent a Corsoreef and a Trawpint. Despite the fact that Sayaka and Lia's teamwork was less than optimal, the two girls managed to earn a victory when Luxi quickly knocked the Corsoreef out and then ganged up on Trawpint with Skelerogue until it fell as well.

Once Sayaka and Lia were declared the winners, it was Serena and Aisha's turn. And once the two girls stepped onto the stage, the reaction from both Ash's group and the Dunsparce Gang was immediate.

"Is... is that Serena?" Clemont asked.

"Whoa! She looks so cool and badass!" Bonnie gushed.

"Look at that, turns out the little princess can rock a wild look!" Amber laughed.

"Heh, now that girl really looks like one of us!" Richard agreed.

"Whoa..." was all that Ash could say.

Rather than her usual white and pink dress with red ribbons, Serena was wearing fishnet tights, a red and black plaid skirt, the blue sleeveless Dunsparce Gang jacket over a black tube top, a red bandana around her forehead, spiked bracelets on her wrists, while her hair was now spiky and wild.

To match her look, Aisha was wearing the Dunsparce Gang jacket over her usual Contest outfit.

"Wow... look at that folks! It seems like Serena has foregone her usual outfit so she and her partner could get matching looks!" Jillian called to attention. "Now that's some team spirit!"

The public seemed to agree, given that they answered Jillian's observation with a round of cheers and applause, the loudest coming from the Dunsparce Gang members.

After that, Jillian announced that the second battle of the first round was about to begin, and instructed the coordinators to present their Pokemon. Serena had chosen Quetzorol for this battle, while Aisha sent her Tanscure. One of her opponents sent a Palij while the other sent an Aromatisse.

The battle began. Unlike Sayaka and Lia, it seemed like Aisha and Serena were making an effort to battle together, with Tanscure attacking in close distances and Quetzroal supporting it from above and behind. Their opponents proved to be tough nuts to crack, with Aromatisse providing support with Light Screen and Heal Pulse, while Palij attacked with powerful Incinerates and Air Slashes.

Ash worried when Palij used Will-O-Wisp on Aisha's Tanscure, burning it.

"Heh, what a dumbass," Richard chuckled.

"That was a mistake," Amber agreed.

"They already have this in the bag," Lou said, satisfied.

"Huh? Why do you say that?" Bonnie asked, confused. "Her Tanscure got burnt! That's not good!"

"Just watch carefully, girlie, and you'll find out," Richard told her.

Both she and the two boys looked at Aisha's Tanscure, who was shaking in place, growling menacingly, as its eyes began to glow bright red, while an aura of the same color shone around its body. It then let out a bone-chilling howl.

"Is... is Tanscure okay?" Bonnie asked, worried.

"Hey, wait a minute, I saw this before! That's Guts!" Ash said in realization, as memories of Paul's Ursaring came to mind.

"Guts?" Bonnie asked.

"It's an ability that vastly increases a Pokemon's offensive power whenever they're victim of a negative status, such as poison, paralysis, or in this case, burns," Clemont explained.

"Exactly! But that's not all, kid!" Lou said, almost shaking with excitement.

"Tanscure, Facade on Palij!" Aisha yelled.

Tanscure's crimson aura glowed so bright, the Pokemon was hardly visible. Letting out yet another howl, it shot against the Fire and Flying-type Pokemon like a scarlet missile, slamming into the bird

and knocking it out instantly. The members of the Dunsparce Gang cheered loudly.

"WHOA! That was so brutal!" Bonnie said, completely shocked. "Guts made Tanscure so strong!"

"It wasn't just Guts. Facade is an attack that becomes twice as powerful if the user is also victim of a negative status," Clemont pointed out. "And combined with Facade..."

"Her Tanscure hits almost as hard as a Legendary Pokemon!" Lou proudly boasted.

And with Palij out, Aromatisse didn't take long to follow. Serena and Aisha were declared the winners, and thus the second finalist team to the cheers of Ash, Clemont, Bonnie and the Dunsparce Gang bikers.

...

As usual, there would be a ten minute intermission before the final round. Serena and Aisha were sitting together in one of the benches of the waiting area, with Lia, the redheaded girl, sitting on a bench alone at the opposite end. Sayaka was nowhere to be seen, though Serena could hear her saying something about going to powder her nose.

"Who's a good boy? Who's a very good boy that took me to the finals?" Aisha asked her Tanscure, while she affectionately rubbed its head with both hands. "Yes, you are! Yes you are!"

"Tan, tans!" Tanscure happily barked, enjoying its trainer's loving caresses.

It was weird. Normally Sayaka would have come to taunt and insult Serena, but the ninja appeared to be hesitant to do so. Perhaps because Aisha was always close to her? Maybe Aisha had scared

Sayaka for good earlier, and she didn't want to push her luck with the biker.

"Hey Serena, you okay?" the older girl said, placing a hand on Serena's shoulder.

"Uh? Oh, yes, I'm fine," she replied, noticing that Aisha had returned her Tanscure.

"You kinda zoned out there for a second," Aisha pointed out, before removing the hand. "Nervous?"

"A little," Serena admitted.

"Hey, it's going to be okay. Between the two of us we're going to demolish the competition and walk out with a ribbon," Aisha reassured her.

"Yes," Serena agreed, thankful for Aisha's optimism.

"Soooo... anything I should know about that Sayaka girl?" Aisha asked. "You told me that she's quite badass despite the attitude problem."

"Well..." Serena started to recall the other times she had faced the raven haired girl, or even the times she fought somebody else. "She likes to make you think you're winning, only to turn the tide of the battle once you lower your guard. Her strategies are often risky, but she makes it play in her favor by using them to lure you into a trap."

"So if it feels like she's biting more than she can chew..."

"She probably can. And she will end up chewing *you* instead," Serena said.

"Lovely," Aisha said. "Though, given what she said, she isn't invincible. She had lost at least once before, right?"

"Yeah, but that was because her opponent used a Z-move," Serena explained.

Aisha raised an eyebrow. "A Z what?"

"I'll explain later," Serena said.

That moment, Sayaka returned from the bathroom, and a few seconds later, the screen on the waiting area announced that the final match was about to begin. Aisha got up from the bench, and stretched her arms.

"Alright, time to win those ribbons," the biker stated. "And don't worry about the ninja girl, okay? Just do your best, and victory will come to us."

Serena nodded, before getting up and following Aisha into the stage.

...

"Now, the moment you've been waiting for!" Jillian excitedly announced. "The Vinoville Town Contest final battle! On one side we have Aisha, from Kevlar Town, and Serena, from Vaniville Town in Kalos!"

The public cheered, the members of the Dunsparce Gang the loudest.

"And on the other side, we have Sayaka from Tsukinami Village, and Lia from Legen Town!"

And as expected, the public also cheered for the second pair of finalists.

"Coordinators, present your Pokemon!"

"Pancham, go!"

"Arbok, gear up!"

"To battle, Sheebit!"

"Glaceon, heed my call!"

Ash had seen every Pokemon present so far except one: Lia's choice, who looked like a rabbit with brown fur, light brown feet, a pair of short tails, and a pair of horns that curled around its round head.

" Sheebit, the Horned Pokemon. Ground. These Pokémon live in packs in mountainous regions. They will often headbutt each other in order to improve their strength," the Pokedex droned.

Sheebit looked cute, and some might judge it as harmless, but Ash knew better than to judge a Pokemon based on their appearance, and had the feeling that that Pokemon could cause more than one headache to Serena and Aisha.

"Five minutes on the clock, begin!" Jillian shouted.

~Serena (Pancham) & Aisha (Arbok) VS Sayaka (Glaceon) & Lia (Sheebit)~

"Let's get this going! Serena, cover me! Arbok, get close to Glaceon and use Thunder Fang!" Aisha stated.

"Yes! Pancham, Dark Pulse at Sheebit!" Serena ordered.

"Glaceon, begin with Hail!" Sayaka ordered.

"Sheebit, counter that Dark Pulse with Mud Bomb- hey, wait a minute!" Lia said, suddenly realizing what Sayaka had ordered.

As Arbok launched itself at Glaceon, jaws wide open with its fangs crackling with electricity and Pancham fired a beam of darkness from his cupped paws, Glaceon summoned a snowstorm above the battlefield, while Sheebit fired a glob of brown mud at Pancham's attack. The Ground and Dark-type moves met in the middle, producing an explosion, as the hail began to pelt the stage. Just as

Arbok was about to sink its fangs into the Fresh Snow Pokemon, this moved out of the way so fast, it almost looked like it vanished.

Serena and Sayaka's joint score dropped.

"Whoa! That Glaceon has some speed!" Aisha said, genuinely impressed.

"That's Glaceon's ability, Snow Cloak! It makes it much faster under hailstorm," Serena explained.

"Huh. That explains why she called for one as her first move," Aisha said, looking at the grey artificial clouds above them.

"Still... calling for a weather effect that only benefits her Pokemon while harming her partner's..." Serena began.

"Hey, why did you do that!? Sheebit is going to suffer under that hailstorm!" Lia hotly complained, validating Serena's suspicions.

Far from listening to her grievances, Sayaka rolled her eyes. "The benefit my Glaceon gets from hail outweighs the negligible harm your Sheebit will take. Now shut up and keep fighting! Keep my Glaceon covered, and I'll win this battle for the two of us! Glaceon, Icy Wind!"

Glaceon took a deep breath, before exhaling a cold gust of air, covering the ground with an expanding sheet of ice. "Glaaaaaaaa...!"

"Pancham, counter with Stone Edge! Get on top of them, and Aisha, have Arbok do the same!" Serena commanded.

"Got it! You heard her, Arbok!" Aisha agreed.

Pancham slammed his paws into the ground, creating a row of rising stone pillars towards Glaceon and Sheebit. Pancham jumped on top of one of them as it rose into the air, while Arbok coiled itself around another and crawled upwards. The Icy Wind, its power magnified by

the hail, was able to freeze the lower third of said pillars as it moved, leaving the two Pokemon untouched.

This caused Sayaka and Lia to lose a few points, putting them equal to Serena and Aisha again.

"Sheebit, destroy those pillars with Drill Run!" Lia commanded

"She, shee!" Sheebit cried, as it ran forward, before jumping while spinning horizontally, turning itself into a living drill.

"Pancham, get close to Glaceon and use Thunder Punch!" Serena ordered.

"Arbok, get off from that pillar and cover Pancham with Seed Bomb!" Aisha commanded.

"Cham, pancham!"

"Shaabak!"

As Pancham jumped from one crumbling pillar to another while curling his paw into a fist that crackled with yellow electricity, Arbok slithered back to ground level, opened its jaws, and fired a salvo of watermelon-sized explosive seeds at Glaceon. The Fresh Snow Pokemon was able to gracefully dodge the projectiles, which exploded upon hitting the ground. Unfortunately, this left it wide open for Pancham, who slammed his tiny, lightning-coated fist into its face, sending it rolling backwards.

Sayaka growled as her and Lia's points dropped below Serena and Aisha's.

"Aw yeah, right in the face!" Aisha cheered.

"Sheebit, quickly, Dragon Tail on Arbok!" Lia called.

"Bit, shee!" the Horned Pokemon cried.

Sheebit, a few meters behind Arbok, quickly dashed towards the Cobra Pokemon and jumped into the air towards it, as its two tails glowed with a deep green light, while tripling in size.

"Arbok, defend yourself with Iron Tail!" Aisha ordered.

"Shaabak!" Arbok hissed as its tail began to glow with a silvery sheen, rising it just in time to parry Sheebit's blow. It didn't end there, as Sheebit and Arbok continued trading blows and parries.

"Pancham, Dark Pulse!"

Before Lia could react, Sheebit was blasted away by a stream of dark power, freeing Arbok from the relentless assault. Sayaka and Lia's points dropped even further.

"Could you stop fooling around? Look how many points you made us lose!" Sayaka chastised Lia.

"I'M the one costing us points!? You're the one who refuses to cooperate!" Lia protested, throwing her arms in the air.

"Sayaka and Lia don't seem to have a very good sense of teamwork. If this battle follows as it is, in no time Serena and Aisha will be the winners!" Jillian announced.

Sayaka snarled at the announcer for agreeing with her redheaded partner.

"Like hell they will! You, tell your Pokemon to regroup with mine, this is where we counterattack!" Sayaka ordered.

"Sheebit, fall back!" Lia said, before turning to Sayaka. "I guess you aren't going to ask me for my opinion on what we should do to beat them, right?"

"Your guess is right," Sayaka said in an acidic tone. "First we open with a ranged move, the two of us at once. Then, we'll move in tandem and gang upon one of their Pokemon. Let's go for the Arbok,

your Sheebit should be able to take it down, given the type advantage."

"Fine," Lia agreed. "Sheebit, Mud Bomb again!"

"Glaceon, Shadow Ball, rapid fire!" Sayaka ordered.

Sheebit took a deep breath, before expelling a barrage of brown globs of mud, just as Glaceon fired a multitude of orbs of darkness as fast as it was able to.

"Arbok, counter it with Sludge Wave! Make it as big as possible!" Aisha ordered.

"Dark Pulse, Pancham! Try to make it wide!" Serena followed.
"Aisha, you know that when the two attacks clash, they will use the explosion as a cover to get close to our Pokemon and strike in close combat, right?"

"Yeah. Though I have an idea to use that little tactic of theirs against them," Aisha said, watching the four attacks collide, resulting in a rather large explosion. "Quickly, have Pancham hide behind Arbok! Trust me, I know what I'm doing!"

"Now! Glaceon, get close with Quick Attack!" Sayaka ordered.

"Sheebit, Drill Run again!" Lia ordered.

Serena decided not to argue and follow her partner's plan.
"Pancham, jump behind Arbok!"

While Pancham hesitated for a bit, in the end he followed the seemingly cowardly tactic and hid behind the larger Poison type. Glaceon was the first one to appear, slamming into Arbok at high speed while leaving a trail of white light behind, followed by Sheebit, spinning as if it was a living drill.

"Shaaaaaa... !" Arbok hissed in pain as it suffered the super effective attack.

This made Aisha and Serena lose points, which were now just barely above Sayaka and Lia's. Aisha, however, wasn't worried, and smirked the moment Sheebit's rotation began to slow down, signifying the end of the attack.

"Arbok, now! Bind on Sheebit!" Aisha said.

Lia gasped in horror as Arbok coiled its large body around Sheebit's smaller one, leaving the horned Pokemon completely immobilized.

"Sheebit, no!" Lia cried.

"And look at that! Aisha took a big gamble, but it paid off!" Jillian said, as Sayaka and Lia's points dropped a little. "With Sheebit hostage, Glaceon will have it much harder to battle against Aisha and Serena's Pokemon!"

As Jillian said this, the redhead turned to Sayaka. "Come on, you have to save it!"

Sayaka rolled her eyes dismissively. "Glaceon, Icy Wind at Arbok!"

"Wait, no! That attack will harm Sheebit too!" Lia protested.

Once again, Glaceon took a deep breath, and exhaled a powerful wind of freezing air towards both Arbok and Sheebit. That moment, Pancham stopped hiding and jumped in front of his partner.

"Pancham, Dark Pulse again!"

"Cham, pan!"

Pancham fired yet another stream of dark power, the attack clashing with the Ice-type move in an explosion of snowflakes and bits of shadowy flame.

"Glaceon now! Get close to Arbok with Quick Attack and smack its ugly face with Iron Tail!" Sayaka ordered.

"Hey! Whose Pokemon's face are you calling ugly!?" Aisha roared.

With its Hail-enhanced speed, Glaceon dashed forward, moving so fast it was little more than a light blue blur for those watching, and once it reached Arbok, it jumped and slapped the Cobra Pokemon with its tail glowing with a silver light. The hit made Arbok recoil, releasing Sheebit in the process, the Horned Pokemon quickly scurrying away from the Poison-type serpent.

Serena and Aisha's points dropped, though they still remained above their rivals' points.

"Yes! Sheebit is free! Good job!" Lia thanked her partner. However, Sayaka merely rolled her eyes again.

"Pancham, Arm Thrust, now! Serena ordered.

"It won't work, dodge it!" Sayaka shouted.

As Pancham tried to punch Glaceon with a glowing white fist, Snow Cloak allowed Glaceon to quickly move aside and avoid the potential super effective attack. However, in its new position it was facing Arbok directly.

"Try dodging this, then! Arbok, Glare!" Aisha ordered, much to Sayaka's surprise.

"Glaceon, don't look at-"

Too late.

"Shaa, shabak!" Arbok hissed, as it locked its eyes, which began to flash with every color of the Rainbow, with Glaceon's. The Fresh Snow Pokemon began to shiver, ironically, as the paralysis set in.

"YES! Ha, try to dodge anything now!" Aisha shouted, throwing a punch into the air.

"No, no, NO! This has to be some kind of sick joke!" Sayaka shouted, grabbing her head.

"Arbok, Iron Tail!" Aisha ordered.

Arbok raised its only appendage, glowing once again with a metallic sheen, using it as a lash against Glaceon. The Fresh Snow Pokemon tried to move, but it wasn't allowed by the paralysis, and the attack connected with a resounding SMACK that sent the poor Ice-type rolling backwards. Sayaka and Lia's points dropped.

"This is our chance! Pancham, follow up with Thunder Punch!" Serena ordered.

"Intercept it, Sheebit!" Lia shouted.

Pancham leaped towards the hurt Glaceon, struggling to get back to its feet, as the Playful Pokemon readied a lightning-enhanced punch. Sheebit, however, got in the way before the attack could connect, shrugging the electricity and taking minimal damage from the fist's motion.

"Yes, now Dragon Tail!" Lia followed.

"She, sheebit!" Sheebit cried, as its tails glowed with green, draconic energy while tripling in size, as its body twisted mid air in order to slap Pancham away from Glaceon.

This made Serena and Aisha lose a few points.

"I guess some thanks are in order," Sayaka begrudgingly said.
"However, this-"

BZZZZZZZZZ!

The buzzer rang, signaling that the five minutes of the match had expired. Both teams of coordinators looked at the screen, and could see that Serena and Aisha had a noticeable point advantage over Aisha and Lia.

"No..." Sayaka said in a whisper, while her partner merely groaned.

"And time's out! The winners of the Vinoville Town's contest are Aisha and Serena!" Jillian announced, as she waved towards the duo, while the main screen of the stage changed to show their pictures and those of their Pokemon with the word WINNERS written in big, colorful capital letters.

The public quickly broke into cheers and applause.

"Yes! Yes! Praise the Twin Gods, we won, Serena!" Aisha said, pulling Serena into a bone-crushing hug, lifting her off the ground.

"Aisha! Can't... ! Breathe... !" Serena wheezed. Once Aisha finally put her down, she looked towards Sayaka and Lia. She wanted to congratulate her opponents for a good fight, but perhaps unsurprisingly, Sayaka was already on her way out of the stage, leaving the redhead alone. Still, it was better than nothing. "Hey, Lia, is it?"

"Yeah," Lia said, a bit crestfallen. "Congratulations for your victory."

"Thank you. Though, you gave us quite the challenging fight. You should feel proud," Serena earnestly said. "In fact, I have the feeling that, had Sayaka been more cooperative, you might have defeated us."

"A part of me wants to agree with you, but solely blaming my teammate for our defeat feels wrong," Lia admitted.

"It's not wrong if it's the truth. She got a little better at the end, but I'm sure you would have done much better if ninja girl was less of an ass to you from the beginning," Aisha said, walking towards them.

Lia didn't say anything.

...

A few minutes later, both Serena, Aisha and their Pokemon were on a podium, with the three judges and Jillian next to her. This time, it was Nurse Joy who handed the winners their respective ribbons.

"It was thanks to both your effort and teamwork that you were able to win. The Vinoville Ribbon is yours!" the blue haired nurse said, as Aisha and Serena picked their prizes.

"Hell yeah, I won another ribbon!" Aisha shouted, as she held the ribbon above her head. The members of the Dunsparce Gang began to cheer wildly.

"Ta-dah! I won the Vinoville Ribbon!" Serena happily cried, mimicking Aisha.

"So, I take this is your fifth ribbon, right, Ms. Aisha?" Rosalind asked. The biker nodded, and the woman said: "In that case, I'll be looking forward to seeing you in the Grand Festival!"

"And thus, the Vinoville Town Contest comes to a close! I hope you had a great time, and see you next time!" Jillian said, officially ending the contest.

...

About half an hour later, Serena had rejoined her friends, and they were in front of the Dunsparce Gang members, already on their bikes.

"So, you have all your five ribbons now, Aisha," Serena asked. "What are you going to do now?"

"Well, first of all, we're going to celebrate it," Aisha said, making some of the other bikers cheer and holler.

"Though somewhere else," Richard added, as he looked around at the rural scenery around him. "I doubt this quaint little town could survive one of our parties."

"And then... well, guess I'll head to East Tendor and train like crazy," Aisha said. "I also heard about a Mega Evolution Master somewhere there, so given that I have time I might pay him a visit and see what he has to offer."

"That sounds good. Hope the next time we meet, it will be at the Grand Festival," Serena said.

"You better be there! I still need that rematch against you. We might be more than halfway into the season, but there should be more than enough time left to win one measly ribbon, right?" Aisha asked.

"Of course! You can count on seeing me during the Grand Festival," Serena assured her.

"Good! That's what I wanted to hear," Aisha said.

"Dunsparce, time to leave!" Richard said, as he and the rest of his bikers turned their bikes around, and drove out of the town, rising no small amount of dust clouds behind as their bikes' engines roared loudly, until they couldn't be heard anymore.

And thus, after bidding their unusual friends a goodbye, the group returned to the Pokemon Center. Now that Serena had won her fourth ribbon, it was Ash's turn to win his fourth badge.

Author's Note: And thus, Serena gets her fourth ribbon! Yay!

I hope you liked the little twist of the battle round being a tag team battle. Contest battles never had more than one coordinator at each side of the battlefield, so I thought it would be a neat little idea to make this contest stand out more from the rest.

I bet you guys forgot about those Dunsparce Gang jackets Ash and co. got at the end of chapter 9. Well, I didn't! I had plan for them all along! Like I said many times before, I'm a veeeeeeery

long-term planner. There are many elements that I introduced in the earlier chapters that won't come into play until later ones.

It's been a while since Aisha made an appearance, isn't it? And I loved to write her again, especially her team up with Serena. Plus, the fact that she appeared alongside Sayaka allowed me a rare opportunity to directly contrast a friendly rival against a mean one. Though, since Aisha has won her final ribbon, she won't be appearing again until the Grand Festival.

Speaking of Sayaka, she returns again after her defeat at the hands of Leona at the Luxury Cruise, though rather than nursing her bruised ego, this second defeat in a row only hurt it even more. The next time she appears, she's going to be even more cutthroat.

Thanks a lot to cricketlaxwolvesbandy, MegaSalamence64, Fox McCloud, berb12335435, hirowriter and Viroro-kun for reviewing the last chapter, as well as special thanks to Viroro-kun for his awesome job as a betareader, whose edits and suggestions made this chapter so much better.

Next chapter, Ash will face Sheldon for his fourth badge. Will he rise victorious? Who knows (well, I do). Also, don't forget to drop a review for this chapter. Until next time!

Real Steel

Chapter 35:

Real Steel

Vinoville Town

"It's surely peaceful here, isn't it?" Serena asked.

"Yeah," Ash replied. "This reminds me of Pallet, but it's even more rural."

"Pi, pika!"

A day has passed after Serena's victory in her latest contest, so the group had decided to take it easy, at least for a day. They had gotten up late, and spent noon celebrating Serena's victory with a grand feast. After that, Ash suggested he and Serena went on another date, something the girl eagerly agreed to.

This time, Ash had brought Pikachu along. Serena had asked him why he left Pikachu with Bonnie on their first date, and when Ash told her what Bonnie had advised him, Serena merely laughed and assured him that she wouldn't have minded if he decided to bring Pikachu along. Sure, dates were a two-people affair, but Pokemon were obviously an exception. So this time the yellow rodent was tagging along for the date.

Though, like in the Wheatfields, Ash didn't have any better idea than take a walk through the town and see the sights, given that a rural place like that didn't have that many things to do. Not that Serena minded, given that since they arrived the day of the contest, she didn't get the chance to know the town a little better before resuming their journey.

And thus they were, slowly walking around the town, holding hands. While there wasn't that much to see, the scenery being mostly fruit trees and crop fields, it was rather relaxing, at the very least.

While it was a little odd experience at first, Ash was rapidly growing more comfortable holding hands with Serena. It filled him with a sense of pleasantness the likes of which he had never experienced before, which grew little by little the more he did it.

"If this is what it feels to be Serena's boyfriend, guess it's something I could get used to in no time," the boy thought.

There were a few buildings that stuck like a sore thumb among all the rural-style, smaller houses, such as the Pokemon Center, the Contest Hall, and the Pokemon Gym, the latter which looked like it was taken out of a place like Bealbeach of Nowtoch, given that it was made mostly of glass, concrete and metal.

"Hey, Ash, look!" Serena said, pointing somewhere.

Following the direction of Serena's hand, Ash saw another building that, if differently from the rest of the residences, fit with the town's décor: a church. It was made of gray stone, with rather colorful stained glass windows, a roof covered in teal tiles, and a small bell tower.

"Say, how about if we take a look inside?" Serena suggested.

"Um... are they going to let us?" Ash asked, scratching his cheek with his free hand.

"Sure, why not? Churches tend to be places that welcome everybody," Serena said, releasing Ash's hand before walking to the large double door made of oak wood. With a little effort, Serena pushed the door open, and she and Ash entered inside.

The first thing they noticed was how much cooler the air was inside, something the two humans and the one Pokemon appreciated.

There were two rows of large wooden benches over a floor composed of tiles made of black marble. At the other end of the instance, there was an altar, and behind said altar there were two large stained glass windows, each depicted a serpentine creature both Ash and Serena presumed they were Pokemon. Both of them were large serpents, one of them being white with multiple orange feathered wings and a black mask covering its face, and the other being black with multiple blue leathery wings and a white mask covering its face.

"Whoa," Ash said, as he walked towards the stained glass. "What are those, Pokemon?"

"Pi..." Pikachu said.

"So it seems. Have you ever seen a Pokemon like that before?" Ash asked Serena.

The honey blonde shook her head. "No. But if I were to guess, they'd be Legendary Pokemon."

"And your guess would be the correct one, child. Though some people might find it blasphemous to refer to the Twin Gods as mere Pokemon, Legendary or not," a new voice said.

Ash and Serena turned around, and saw an old man with a head full of white hair, wearing a black and white priestly robe walking out of a nearby door.

"I'm sorry if I startled you. I heard some voices, so I came to check if somebody was here or if my mind was starting to fail me," the priest said, smiling a little. "And I'm glad to see it was the former, hehe. Though, I'm a little surprised to see visitors here, given that there's no service today."

"Oh, in that case, we'll be going now!" Serena said, a little embarrassed.

"Yeah, we didn't want to bother you..." Ash added.

"Oh no, you misunderstand me! It's not my intention to make you leave," the priest stated. "The church is open for most of the day to anybody who wishes to enter, either be locals, or foreigners such as yourselves."

"How do you know we are foreigners?" Ash asked.

"That's not a Pokemon you can find around these lands, now is it?" the priest asked, as he gently rubbed Pikachu under his ear, making the electric rodent coo. "You saw the church, and your interest was piqued, at least a little, wasn't it? Well, our quaint little town is a paradise for those who seek peace and quiet, but for energetic youths, I'm afraid it doesn't have that much to offer..."

"Still, we decided it would be good if we got to know it a little before we left," Serena began. "Since that's what we do with every town and city we visit."

The priest smiled. "In that case, I hope that you at least get something interesting from your visit by the time you continue your journey," he then turned towards the two main stained glass windows. "Though, now that I remember, you were talking about them, didn't you? The Twin Gods."

"So... Do you worship those Pokemon in this church?" Serena asked.

"Indeed. The one with the orange wings is Aotius, the White Light that illuminates the world. The other one, with the blue wings is Mutios, the Black Shade that protects it. According to our beliefs, they're the creator deities that willed the world into existence, shaped it, and kept it in balance through their power," the priest explained.

"Oh, so that explains why some people mentioned some Twin Gods," Serena said, as she remembered both Natalie and Sayaka swearing by them.

"Yes. Even if people are not as eager to engage in the faith as it was in the past, the worship of the Twin Gods remains a strong part of Tandorian culture," the priest nodded, before adding. "Not in all of Tandor, though. In the northern parts of East Tandor there's still another religion, an old one that keeps going strong there: the Acolytes of the Dragon. They pray to Actan and Lanthan, the Brothers of Metal.

"That used to be Tandor's main religion in the ancient times, before we started worshipping the Twin Gods. Though many people in the East remained faithful to the old religion," the priest finished explaining.

"Fascinating..." Ash said.

"Pi, pikachu," the Mouse Pokemon added.

"So, if it's not meddling, might I ask what brings a pair of youths to Vinoville?" the priest asked. "Perhaps the Contest? Or to challenge our Pokemon Gym? If it's the latter, Sheldon might be most pleased. His boredom with our town makes him lash out in the most unbecoming of ways."

"Both, actually. Serena just won the contest held yesterday, and I'm about to challenge Sheldon tomorrow," Ash explained.

The priest nodded. "I'm happy to hear of your victory, young lady. And I'll pray for your success against Sheldon as well."

"Thank you!" Ash said.

The priest rubbed his forehead. "I also pray for you to give Sheldon a battle good enough to leave him satisfied for some time. Otherwise, I'm afraid of what he might do in his battle with boredom."

"Well, I'll try my best," Ash said, chuckling a little.

"Oh, don't worry. Ash will leave Sheldon completely stumped. He won't be the first Gym Leader left in awe before Ash's skill," Serena praised, making Ash redden a little.

"I hope he will. I really hope he will," the priest said.

...

After leaving the church, the couple continued their tour through Vinoville, but there weren't that many sights to see, so they quickly returned to the Pokemon Center so Ash could prepare for his impending match with Sheldon.

The Pallet Town native had been hard at it for many hours, pushing all his Pokemon, Pikachu excluded, into giving their all. Despite the fact that the sun was beginning to set, he didn't show any hints of tiredness or slowing down.

"Raptorch, Brick Break!" Ash ordered.

"Parry with Iron Tail, Nucleon!" Clemont shouted.

The Fire Dino Pokemon and the Atomic Pokemon leaped towards each other, their respective tails glowing with power, one with pure white light, the other shining like polished metal, before clashing against each other. Neither won the duel, with the two Pokemon landing back on their feet, close to their initial spot.

"Very well Raptorch! I'd say your Brick Break is pretty solid. Now, let's test the speed and power of your Flame Impact!" Ash said.

"Nucleon, try to block his way with Quick Attack, but make sure not to touch him!" Clemont instructed.

"Ra, rap!"

"Nuuuuu!"

Raptorch's entire body was coated in flames, before barreling forward like a burning rocket, leaving a trail of scorched marks behind. Nucleon's body began to crackle with green sparks, as it dashed next to Raptorch, blocking his path and keeping up with him as the Fire Dino Pokemon changed direction, leaving a trail of fading green light.

Such detail didn't go unnoticed to the Kantonian trainer, who shifted his attention from his Pokemon to Clemont's.

"Clemont...?" Ash asked, scratching his temple. "I think Nucleon just learned a new move. Because that doesn't look like a Quick Attack..."

"It did look like one, but at the same time it didn't," Bonnie pointed out.

"Nucleon? Was that a Quick Attack?" Clemont asked.

"Cle," Nucleon nodded.

"Hmmm..." Serena hummed, as she began to fiddle with her Pokedex. "Maybe it's... oh, of course!"

"Serena?" Ash asked.

"Yeah, that's a Quick Attack. Though a little different thanks to Nucleon's ability, Atomizate," Serena began, reading from the Pokedex's screen. "Atomizate is an ability unique to Nucleon that converts Normal-type moves into Nuclear-type ones, on top of giving them a small boost in power."

"So, like Galvanize or Aerilate, but with the Nuclear type," Clemont surmised.

"Whoa! That sounds like a really cool ability!" Ash gushed.

"Indeed. Though, not that it would be of much help now, given that from what I heard, Sheldon favors Steel-type Pokemon," Clemont

pointed out.

"Yep! But that's why I believe this Gym Leader is perfect for Raptorch's battle debut!" Ash said, causing Raptorch to happily yip. "Even if I didn't have as much time to train him as the others, I believe he won't have much trouble against Sheldon. The little guy has a lot of energy and strength, and neither of us can wait to put it to good use!"

"Sheldon isn't somebody to be underestimated, though. You already saw his S51-A in action, and it was far from a pushover," Clemont reminded Ash. "I presume his other Pokemon will be close in strength."

And indeed, his friend's words reminded Ash the night of the battle with the UFO Pokemon. It proved to be quite the formidable adversary, and that was fighting on its own. No one could tell what that Pokemon would do when coached by an experienced Gym Leader.

Though, rather than feeling intimidated, such thought caused excitement to boil inside him. "I wouldn't want it any other way. I haven't come to Tandor to battle against easy Gym Leaders!"

"Pi, pika!"

"Rap!"

"Though, if you or your Pokemon want to be of any challenge to Sheldon, you'd better take it easy for the rest of the day," Serena advised. "Or else you'd be too exhausted for tomorrow."

...

The next morning, right after having breakfast, the group headed straight to Sheldon's Pokemon Gym.

If the place stuck out on the outside when compared to the rest of the town, that was nothing once one could see its insides. After crossing its automatic double doors, Ash and his friends felt like they had entered inside some sort of spaceship or futuristic building, given the walls covered in plates of white metal, soft lights, and multiple screens hanging from them.

"Welcome to the Vinoville Town Pokemon Gym, Ash Ketchum," a synthetic but pleasant female voice said, startling the aforementioned trainer a little, as pictures of his face next to information about him appeared on the screens.

"Whoa! That was super creepy!" Bonnie said, hugging Dedenne protectively. "Has he been spying on you or something?"

"Hey, who are you calling creepy!?" Sheldon's voice protested from the intercom, startling her. "My cameras identified Ash because they're connected to an AI with facial recognition software that tries to identify any trainer that sets a foot on my Gym! Even if I already knew that Ash would come sooner or later."

"Whoa, that sounds really useful! Maybe I could add it to the Lumiose Gym!" Clemont said, clearly impressed by the innovation.

"Oh no, he's giving him ideas," Bonnie groaned.

"Indeed it is! And that's only one of the many improvements I have made to this old Gym until I turned it into a technological wonder!" Sheldon boasted.

"You made these improvements yourself?" Clemont asked.

"Yeah! I may be a Gym Leader, but I'm also something of a scientist myself," Sheldon's voice boasted. "And by 'something' I mean 'proud holder of two doctorates'. But you didn't come here to hear about my scientific achievements, would you? Now, follow the arrows to get to the arena!"

Ash's profile disappeared from the screens, being replaced by sliding arrows that guided the group towards the main battleground in question. After taking a few twists and turns through several identical looking hallways, they finally reached the arena.

"Whoa..." Ash said in awe.

While the battleground itself was nothing to write home about, being just a plain sheet of concrete with nothing else on it, there were many giant screens of varying sizes hanging around the place, and multiple spotlights on the ceiling, keeping the place well illuminated. And rather than the usual bleachers, the seats for the spectators looked more like the cushion seats you'd see at a theater.

Floating above the arena were multiple S-51 holding cameras on their arms. In the middle of the battleground there was a brunette woman with long hair and glasses, wearing the jacket typical of Pokemon referees, as well as a flag on each hand.

All in all, it looked closer to what you'd see at a stadium hosting League Battles rather than any other Pokemon Gym.

"Welcome to my Gym! Feast your eyes with such a well crafted, high-tech and innovative battleground, which, hopefully, will be how all of Tandor's battlegrounds will look like in the not so distant future!" Sheldon said, as he began to walk towards them, spreading his arms around.

"This Gym is simply incredible! Once I get back to Prism Tower, we need to do some serious renovations!" Clemont gushed.

"Thank you! It's great to see somebody appreciating my good work!" Sheldon said. "Now, shall we begin?"

"Do you really need to ask?" Ash replied, as his lips curved into a grin of eagerness.

"Great! Then take your spot on the battleground! Your friends can see the battle from the seats," Sheldon said, before he himself went to take his spot at the opposite side of the arena.

"Good luck, Ash," Serena said, before she, Clemont and Bonnie took their seats in the spectator's area.

"Now Amy, if you'd be so kind?" Sheldon asked the referee.

The referee, Amy, nodded, and after Ash and Sheldon were in place, she raised both her flags. "This is an official Gym Battle between the Gym Leader Sheldon, and Ash Ketchum. The battle will be single format with no time limit, and each trainer will use up to three Pokemon. The battle will be over when one side has no more Pokemon remaining. Only the challenger may make substitutions. Trainers, select your first Pokemon."

The moment she said that, the S-51 flew in position, recording the battleground from different angles which was then broadcasted on each of the screens. The main screen, though, had a scoreboard with Ash and Sheldon's portraits, and three empty slots for each of their Pokemon, in the same fashion as the league stadiums.

"Raptorch, I choose you!" Ash said, tossing a pokeball forward. The capture device opened, releasing the smiling Fire Dino Pokemon.

"A Fire and Ground-type, huh? I see you did your homework. Still, you're going to need more than type advantage to bring this bad boy down! Tracton, go beyond!" Sheldon said, sending his first pick.

The pokeball opened, releasing a rather large, weird looking Pokemon neither Ash nor his friends had ever seen before. It looked more like a machine or a vehicle than a living being: it had a sleek, elongated metal body, gray on the back, yellow with black stripes on the front. At each of its sides were two tank treads with three wheels. Its head, connected through a black, tube-like neck to the main body, looked like a pair of excavator shovels fused together

by its ends, and had a red eye on each of its sides. It also had a small black tail with a yellow orb on its end.

Both Ash and Serena scanned this new Pokemon with their Pokedex:

"Tracton, the Crane Beast Pokemon. Dragon/Steel. A Mechanical Dragon Pokemon that is often used to help construction workers. Its jaws can crumple steel with ease," the devices explained.

"Whoa. That Pokemon looks scary," Bonnie said.

"Nene," Dedenne agreed.

"Yeah. And the Pokedex's description didn't make it look any less threatening," Clemont observed. "Let's hope Ash and Raptorch can keep up."

As pictures of Raptorch and Tracton appeared on each of the first of the empty slots next to Ash and Sheldon's portraits, the referee lowered both flags in a chopping motion. "Begin!"

~Challenger Ash (Raptorch, ?, ?) VS Gym Leader Sheldon (Tracton, ?, ?)~

"Alright Tracton, begin with Crunch!" Sheldon ordered.

"Trac, Tracton!" Tracton roared, as its treads spun in place, rising a cloud of dust, before it blitzed towards Raptorch, its metallic jaws wide open.

"Whoa! So fast!" Serena said as she saw Tracton turn into a blur.

"Raptorch, avoid it with Flame Impact!" Ash ordered.

Raptorch's entire body was coated in flames before it dashed to the side, narrowly avoiding Tracton's metallic jaws clamping over his body. The Fire Dino Pokemon then raced around the battleground, chased by Tracton, who kept trying and failing to bite him. Even if

Tracton was fast, it couldn't match Raptorch's speed while using Flame Impact.

"Now stop and use Brick Break!" Ash ordered.

Raptorch abruptly stopped, the fire coat disappearing as quickly as it formed while his tail glowed with white light, before delivering a roundhouse tail slap at the coming Tracton in the face, whose building momentum made it impossible for it to stop or take a turn.

"Traaaaac!" it complained upon taking the super effective move.

"Yes! The first hit is ours!" Ash cheered, pumping a fist in the air.
"Now, let's keep going! Raptorch, Flamethrower!"

"Raaaaaaap... !" Raptorch took a deep breath, before releasing a massive stream of flames at the Crane Beast Pokemon.
"TOOOOOOORCH!"

"Tracton, use Shift Gear and avoid it!" Sheldon ordered.

Tracton's body glowed with a silvery light as ethereal gears and cogs appeared around it for a couple seconds, and moved away from the Flamethrower before the attack could reach it, its treads screeching angrily and rising an even larger cloud of dust.

"Shift Gear?" Serena asked.

"It's a move that vastly increases the speed and attack power of a Pokemon," Clemont explained, as he looked at Tracton apprehensively. "I thought that only the Klinklang line could learn that move, but guess I was wrong..."

Raptorch moved his head in order to catch Tracton with the flames, but the Crane Beast Pokemon was fast, much faster than a moment ago.

"Good! Now get close and use Crunch again!" Sheldon ordered.

Tracton expertly maneuvered around the Flamethrower as it got close to Raptorch, clamping its metallic jaws menacingly. Ash scowled, knowing that his current tactic wasn't going to work.

"Raptorch, drop the Flamethrower and use Dig!" Ash commanded.

The torrent of flames ceased, and Raptorch burrowed underground just in time to avoid Tracton's jaws for a second time. Wasting no time, it emerged from below, smacking Tracton's underbelly with a powerful headbutt, knocking the Crane Beast Pokemon backwards.

"Trac, ton!" it complained again.

"Man, that little guy is a fast one, isn't he? Tracton is my fastest Pokemon, yet it has yet to land a single hit," Sheldon said, crossing his arms.

"And you have seen nothing yet! Raptorch, Flame Impact again!" Ash ordered, throwing a hand forward.

"Raaaaaap!" Raptorch yipped, coating himself in a cloak of flames, before shooting towards Tracton.

Sheldon didn't look worried in the slightest. "Oh well, if outspeeding you won't work, guess I'll have to change my strategy. Tracton, Lock-On!"

Tracton's red eyes glimmered crimson as a crosshair of the same color appeared on Raptorch's flank, just before he slammed against Tracton.

"Wait... what did Tracton do?" Bonnie asked. "It had no effect on Raptorch, but..."

"Lock-On makes the next move impossible to dodge," Clemont explained. "Ash has been relying on Raptorch's superior speed provided by Flame Impact in order to avoid Tracton's attacks, but such tactic won't work anymore with Lock-On."

"Now Tracton..." Sheldon raised a single finger while grinning savagely. "Draco Meteor!"

"No!" Serena yelped. The memory of Ash's Gible using such a devastating attack against Braixen back in Pallet returned to her mind with thunderous force. And Raptorch wouldn't be able to dodge such an attack!

Tracton opened its metallic jaws, its body glowing orange as it formed an orb of light of the same color between them. The orb then shot upwards, exploding into meteors that fell back to the ground. However, rather than falling in a wide area, the meteors began to fly towards Raptorch as if they had life on their own.

Before Ash could tell him anything, Raptorch began to run away from the meteors, who chased him like an angry swarm. Unfortunately, the Fire Dino Pokemon wasn't fast enough, and the meteors smashed against him, engulfing the Tandorian started inside a chain of explosions.

"Raptorch!" Ash cried.

When the smoke of the explosions vanished, Ash could see his Pokemon. Raptorch was still able to stand on his feet, but the attack had made a number on him, as there were numerous burnt marks and bruises across his body, which was trembling with pain.

"Look at that! Not only is the little guy fast, but much more resilient than it looks!" Sheldon observed. "Though, is he resilient enough to resist a second Draco Meteor? Let's find out! Tracton, Lock-On!"

Tracton's eyes glowed red, as yet another crosshair appeared on Raptorch's body.

"Raptorch, return!" Ash quickly said, returning his Pokemon back to the capture device.

Serena couldn't help but sigh in relief as Raptorch was saved from a second round of the brutal attack. While Ash definitely made the right decision, what other Pokemon could be able to counter such a devastating combo?

Ash himself seemed to ponder that question as well, given that it took him several moments to choose his next battler. "Dunsparce, I choose you!"

As the Land Snake Pokemon materialized on the battleground, his picture appeared on the second slot on Ash's side of the screen, while Raptorch's picture was grayed out.

"A Dunsparce? Hm, interesting choice. Foregoing type advantages upon seeing how little they help you?" Sheldon taunted.

"Raptorch already did plenty to help me win this round. Dunsparce is here to finish the job," Ash confidently replied.

"Dun," Dunsparce grumbled.

"Very well then. Let's see if your Dunsparce is able to fare better than your Raptorch. Lock-On!" Sheldon shouted.

"Dunsparce, Ancient Power!" Ash replied.

As Tracton's eyes glowed red, a crosshair mark of the same color appeared on Dunsparce's back. Meanwhile, the Land Snake Pokemon summoned a ring of golden rocks around him, which he launched against the Crane Beast Pokemon. The attack landed, though it did minimal damage.

"And now, Draco Meteor!" Sheldon said.

Once again, Tracton's body glowed orange, as it formed a sphere of light of the same color between its jaws. Said orb shot upwards, exploding into a mass of meteors that flew towards Dunsparce like a flock of hungry birds of prey towards a particularly tasty meal.

"Dunsparce, stop those meteors with Ancient Power!" Ash commanded.

Dunsparce summoned a ring of golden rocks for the second time in a row, before throwing them at the incoming asteroids. The golden boulders smashed into the meteors with flawless accuracy, making them explode prematurely, and successfully stopping the attack. And for an added boon, a golden aura flashed over Dunsparce's body for a second.

"Yes!" Ash cheered.

"Awesome! Dunsparce has stopped the Draco Meteor!" Serena cheered.

"Indeed. Undodgeable doesn't mean unblockable. And not just that! Ancient Power's extra effect has been triggered! Now Dunsparce is stronger than before!" Clemont added.

"Come on Ash and Dunsparce! You have this!" Bonnie shouted.

"Clever maneuver, boy! No wonder other Gym Leaders are gushing so much about you! But I'm not an easily impressed man!" Sheldon said, though it was obvious he was a little miffed over Ash blocking his Draco Meteor. "Tracton, use Lock-On again!"

As the non-damaging move was used for the third time in a row, Ash gave his command. "So you think our counter-maneuver was a fluke? In that case, Dunsparce, prepare an Ancient Power again!"

Dunsparce summoned yet another spinning ring of golden boulders, these ones a bit larger and with sharper edges than those used before, thanks to the recent power boost.

"... and follow up with Iron Head!" Sheldon said.

"What!?" Ash shouted.

"Traaaaaaac!" The Crane Beast Pokemon let out a roar as it launched itself headfirst at Dunsparce, streaks of silvery light coming from it.

Dunsparce launched the salvo of golden rocks, but Tracton's attack plowed through them as if they were made of soft clay, before it slammed its head against Dunsparce, sending the yellow snake rolling backwards.

"Dunsparce!" Ash cried.

"Now, Crunch! Don't let him escape!" Sheldon ordered.

Tracton dashed towards Dunsparce, still dizzy from the brutal impact, and clamped its metallic jaws around the Land Snake Pokemon's body, who wriggled uselessly against his opponent.

"Dun, dunsparce, dun!" Dunsparce cried as he trashed around, but Tracton didn't budge.

"Dunsparce, use Ancient Power again!" Ash ordered. "Aim for its face!"

Dunsparce summoned another ring of golden boulders, but much to his and Ash's frustration, the boulders flickered and disintegrated into dust before they could reach its final size.

"Nice try Ash, but not good enough!" Sheldon mocked.

"Hey, what gives! Why did the Ancient Power fail?" Bonnie protested.

"Ancient Power isn't a move that can be used many times in a row. It's a strong move with a powerful aftereffect, but as a trade-off, it can't be used many times in a short timespan," Clemont explained.

"Now, Lock-On!" Sheldon said.

"Though, Lock-On is also a move that can't be spammed either, but that doesn't seem to be a problem for Sheldon..." Clemont said in

contemplation. "Maybe he trained Tracton so he could use that move many times consecutively..."

Serena covered her hands with her mouth as Tracton placed that crosshair mark on Dunsparce again. She knew what came next, given that Dunsparce could no longer use Ancient Power as he did before. First Raptorch and now Dunsparce. Isn't there anything that could stop that brutal machine dragon?

"And let's finish this with Draco Meteor!" Sheldon ordered with a wave of his hand.

Tracton tossed Dunsparce back, as it formed an orb of orange light between its jaws. The orb flew upwards, and exploded into a multitude of meteors that homed on Dunsparce. Sheldon smirked, knowing that his first victory drew near.

But as Sheldon was about to learn, Ash wasn't somebody who was frightened in the face of impossible odds.

"Dunsparce, use Rollout to get close to Tracton!" Ash ordered.

"Par, parce!" Dunsparce cried as he curled into a ball and rolled towards the Crane Beast Pokemon, with the meteors trailing behind.

"I know what you plan to do, Ash, and it won't work! Tracton, Shift Gear again, and run away from Dunsparce!" the bespectacled Gym Leader ordered.

Tracton glowed with a silvery light as several cogs and gears appeared around it for a second, before it dashed away from Dunsparce. The two Pokemon ran around the battleground in circles, with the meteors slowly closing their distance on Dunsparce.

"Keep running, Tracton! Your stamina is far greater than Dunsparce's! He will get tired much sooner than you, and when he does, boom!" Sheldon shouted.

"That's what you think!" Ash confidently said with an energetic arm wave. "Dunsparce, swerve to the right!"

The rolling Dunsparce abruptly changed his course, and cut a diagonal line across the battleground. Tracton hadn't realized this and kept running in circles, not realizing the shortcut Dunsparce had taken in order to reach it faster.

"Tracton, turn to the right!" Sheldon warned, his eyes growing wide as he realized what Ash had planned.

"Tracton is fast but it can't make close turns! Dunsparce has no such problems!" Ash boasted. "Now Dunsparce, latch onto its face!"

"Parce!" Dunsparce cried, as he uncurled and launched himself at Tracton. He didn't land on its face, but rather its long neck. Still, Ash considered it a good outcome.

"Tracton, shake him off, now!" Sheldon desperately cried, watching how the Draco Meteor came closer.

"Traaaaaaac!" Tracton roared, as it wildly shook its neck, but Dunsparce remained firmly latched onto it.

The meteors were practically onto them.

"Dunsparce, Dig!" Ash shouted.

Dunsparce jumped off of Tracton's neck and quickly burrowed underground. And less than a second later, Tracton was bombarded by the very same meteors it had summoned, which were unable to change course in such a minuscule amount of time, engulfing the Crane Beast Pokemon inside multiple explosions.

"Tracton!" Sheldon cried again.

When the smoke from the explosions vanished, Tracton was there, lying sideways, its chassis completely burned, its jaws wide open, and its eyes completely blank.

The referee raised a flag in Ash's direction. "Tracton is unable to battle! The winner is Dunsparce!"

As Ash's friends cheered, Dunsparce returned to the surface and said something that sounded a lot like a boast.

As Tracton's picture turned completely black in the scoreboard, Sheldon returned his defeated Pokemon with a sigh.

"Good work, friend. At least you forced him to make a switch," Sheldon said, as he grabbed the pokeball containing his next choice. "Alright then, Dearewl, go beyond!"

The capture device opened, and just for once, it revealed a Pokemon Ash and his friends were familiar with.

"Dea, rewl!" the Dearewl cried, as its picture appeared on the scoreboard.

"Parce," Dunsparce said, smirking widely, as if he expected this battle to be easy. Given that Dunsparce had already defeated another Dearewl during a Gym Battle, he probably thought that this was nothing he couldn't handle.

Hopefully Ash wouldn't be as overconfident.

"Dunsparce versus Dearewl, begin!" the referee said.

"Dunsparce, begin with Rollout!" Ash ordered.

"Par, Dunsparce!" Dunsparce cried energetically as he curled into a ball and rolled against his foe.

"We'll fight spinning with more spinning! Dearewl, Gyro Ball!" Sheldon ordered.

Dearewl's entire body began to glow with a silvery light as the Iron Horn Pokemon curled into a ball and rolled against Dunsparce. The two Pokemon clashed against each other for a few seconds, the

friction caused by the grinding resulting in a shower of sparks, until Dearewl won the struggle and sent Dunsparce tumbling backwards.

"Great! Now, follow it with Metal Whip!" Sheldon ordered.

"Don't let him catch you! Dunsparce, Dig!" Ash countered.

Dunsparce was able to burrow underground with only a second to spare before the steel cable coming out of Dearewl's organic helmet could have caught him. Sheldon an annoyed frown appeared on Sheldon's face.

"Do all your Pokemon know Dig or what?" the bespectacled man asked.

"No, but maybe I should teach them that move, given how useful it is," Ash deadpanned, just as Dunsparce burst from under Dearewl, smashing his head against its underbelly, launching the Rock and Steel-type Pokemon backwards.

"Dearewl!" Sheldon cried, worried about his Pokemon after taking a super effective strike. Dearewl was able to get back on its legs, and glared at Dunsparce, who shot it a look of superiority. "Are you okay?"

"Deeeee..." Dearewl seethed.

Then, there was a crackling noise, and Dearewl's body began to glow with a bright bluish-white light, as its body began to change and grow.

And grow.

And grow.

And grow.

And as it did, all those present craned their necks upwards in order to keep up with the process. And with the exception of Sheldon and

the referee, all of them were starting to grow worried.

"Gar!"

Once the process was over, a new Pokemon stood in Dearewl's place. It was much bigger than its preevolution, being almost twice as tall as Ash, with extremely long legs and a long neck. Its metallic skin had gone from light brown to dull yellow. It had steel plates on its knees, a steel, spiked helmet on its head with a long steel wire coming from the central spike, and a saddle-like metal growth on its back.

"Ohohoho, look at that!" Sheldon laughed, while both Ash and especially Dunsparce looked at the new Pokemon in awe and a little worry. "Sorry kid, but luck's not on your side!"

"Sheldon's Pokemon evolved mid battle? That's not fair!" Bonnie protested.

"But Ash's Pokemon sometimes evolved mid battle. Don't you remember Davern?" his brother reminded her.

"Yeah, but..." Bonnie pouted, crossing her arms in frustration. "It sucks when it happens to a Pokemon Ash is battling..."

"Well, it sucks for Ash's opponents too when it happens," Clemont countered.

While the siblings bickered, Serena scanned this new Pokemon with her Pokedex.

"Gararewl, the Iron Beast Pokemon. Dearewl's evolution, and Barewl's final form. Steel. They often have to leave the cave that they grew up in as Barewl, because caves are seldom able to accommodate its massive size."

Serena could believe that description. She was still having a hard time believing that a few seconds ago, that metallic behemoth that

towered over all of them barely reached Ash's waist as a Dearewl.

"Alright Gararewl, let's see how well you do now that you have reached your final form! Time for a Stone Edge!"

"Rewl!" Gararewl cried as it stomped one of its hooves into the ground, followed by a row of consecutive stone pillars rising towards Dunsparce.

"Dunsparce, Dig again!" Ash called, making Sheldon roll his eyes.

"Dun, dunspa!" he cried, before burrowing underground for the second time in a row, just in time to allow him to escape the Rock-type move.

"Gararewl, stay where you are and wait for him to come out! And once he does, give him a good Stomp!" Sheldon ordered.

And indeed, a few seconds later Dunsparce burst from underground, slamming his body against the Iron Beast Pokemon's front legs. Unfortunately, Gararewl gave Dunsparce quite the powerful and painful kick that sent the Land Snake Pokemon rolling backwards.

"Dunsparce!" Ash cried.

"And finish with Stone Edge!" Sheldon said making a hand gun.

With another mighty stomp, Gararewl summoned yet another row of rising stone pillars. Still reeling from the Stomp, Dunsparce was unable to dodge them this time, and the attack sent the hapless Normal-type Pokemon flying into the air, before it fell back to the ground with a loud thud.

"Dunsparce, no!" Ash shouted again.

Dunsparce laid on his back on the crater he had opened with his fall. His whole body was beaten and bruised, and didn't make any attempt to move.

The referee raised a flag in Sheldon's direction.

"Dunsparce is unable to battle! The winner is Gararewl!" the referee said, just as Dunsparce's icon on the scoreboard was blacked out, while the rock pillars from the Stone Edge crumbled into nothingness.

Ash sighed, before returning Dunsparce to his pokeball. "Thank you, buddy. You did your best."

"This doesn't look good to Ash," Clemont commented. "All he has now is his tired Raptorch, and I assume either Greninja or Metalynx for his last pick. While Sheldon has his freshly evolved Gararewl, and his last Pokemon, which I assume will be that S51-A."

"This is nothing new. Ash has already been in battles with the odds against him, yet he prevailed," Serena said, as she clasped the blue ribbon hanging on her black shirt.

"Yeah! Did you see how Ash used Tracton's own Draco Meteor to beat it? And I'm sure Ash still has another awesome trick under his sleeve!" Bonnie cheered.

Serena smiled. She could always count on Bonnie to share her optimism.

"Raptorch, I choose you!" Ash said, sending the Fire Dino Pokemon into battle for the second time. Raptorch's icon on the scoreboard recovered its color.

Raptorch materialized, and even if he didn't look as full of energy as when Ash sent him for the first time, he looked eager to for another chance to win, the imposing size of his opponent having no effect on his morale, no doubt thanks to the resting time Dunsparce had bought him.

"Raptorch versus Gararewl, begin!" the referee said, lowering her flags.

"Alright Raptorch, let's begin with Dig!" Ash said.

"Ra, torch!" Raptorch yipped, before burying himself underground.

"Man, do your Pokemon know any attack other than Dig?" Sheldon groaned. "Or do you find it fun to fill my battleground with holes? You know what to do, Gararewl."

Gararewl cried as it prepared to kick Raptorch the moment it became visible.

"Raptorch, use Flamethrower from underground!" Ash shouted.

"What!?" Sheldon cried, taken aback.

A geyser of red and orange flames burst from the ground under Gararewl, roasting the Steel-type Pokemon. Crying in pain, the Steel Beast Pokemon jumped away, before Raptorch emerged from the hole his attack had created.

"Very clever. You knew I could use Stone Edge to block a long range Flamethrower, so you used Dig to get close to Gararewl," Sheldon said, adjusting his glasses. "But here's a move you won't be able to block! Gararewl, Rock Tomb!"

"Gaaaaa... !" the Steel-type Pokemon cried as it conjured a multitude of giant boulders above Raptorch.

"Raptorch, use Flame Impact to dodge them!" Ash commanded.

Once they fully materialized, gravity did their job and made them fall to the ground with loud thuds, while Raptorch's body was coated in flames, and blitzed through the rain of rocks before he could be crushed under any of them.

"Good! Now get close to Gararewl!" Ash ordered.

"Gararewl, Stomp once he gets close enough!" Sheldon shouted.

Like a red, burning missile, Raptorch shot towards his much larger foe. However, he was forced to make a sudden break and jump aside in order to avoid being flattened by Gararewl's metallic hoof. The Iron Beast Pokemon tried to stomp on Raptorch any time it got close, with none of them being able to land a hit on the other.

"Gararewl, Stone Edge again!" Sheldon ordered.

"Raptorch, quickly, dodge!" Ash urged.

As Gararewl stomped one hoof on the ground, summoning another row of rising stone pillars, Raptorch quickly jumped aside, narrowly dodging them.

"Now, Gararewl, catch that annoying saurian with Metal Whip! Wrap it around its jaws so he can't use Flamethrower!" Sheldon commanded.

"Ga, gara!" Gararewl cried, as it cast its iron wire like a fisher would cast a fishing rod.

"Raptorch, Dig!" Ash shouted.

Before the glowing iron wire could catch Raptorch, the Fire Dino Pokemon burrowed underground, narrowly avoiding it.

"Gararewl, stay on the move! Don't let him catch you off guard with another underground Flamethrower!" Sheldon urged.

Gararewl obeyed, and began to move around the battleground in random patterns with long strides.

"Raptorch, get under Gararewl and use Flamethrower from underground!" Ash ordered.

"What? Why is Ash doing that? Sheldon just warned Gararewl against that tactic!" Bonnie pointed out, incredulous.

"It makes no sense, yes..." Clemont agreed, as he placed a finger under his chin, pensive. "Ash must be thinking something..."

"Indeed. Ash isn't somebody to just spam attacks at random. I'm sure he must be cooking a tactic to win as we speak," Serena confidently said.

However, as she watched Raptorch fire one Flamethrower after another from underground, blowing holes over the battleground, while Gararewl dodged them all, the honey blonde couldn't guess what was going through Ash's head. Raptorch's stamina was great, but sooner or later it would run out, and then-

"Ga!" Gararewl cried, as it tripped back.

"Huh?" Bonnie asked.

Ash smirked.

It took most people present a couple seconds to realize that, while jumping away from the underground Flamethrowers, Gararewl had unwittingly sunk one of its back legs into one of the holes, making it lose its balance.

"Yes! This is our chance, Raptorch! Come out and use Flame Impact! Aim for the front legs!" Ash commanded.

"Rap, torch!" Raptorch yipped, as he burst from underground, before coating himself in flames and shot towards the Iron Beast Pokemon.

"Gararewl, quickly, get out of there!" Sheldon urged, trying and failing to mask the building panic in his voice.

However, Raptorch managed to reach Gararewl before the much larger Pokemon could pull the leg from the hole, smashing it against its front legs.

"Yes, keep going Raptorch! More Flame Impacts!" Ash encouraged, his voice overflowing with the excitement that comes with victory

being at hand.

Raptorch continued his fiery onslaught, assaulting Gararewl from multiple sides with consecutive Flame Impacts.

"Gaaaaaa!" it cried in pain, as the pain, burns and bruises kept building up.

"Time to finish this! Flamethrower!" Ash said, thrusting a fist forward.

"Raaaaaaaaa... !" Raptorch took a deep breath.

"TOOOOOOOOORCH!"

Gararewl was engulfed by the roaring torrent of flames exhaled by Raptorch. Needless to say, the super effective attack managed to snuff the last of Gararewl's energy. When the flames vanished, the Iron Beast Pokemon was lying on the ground sideways, unconscious.

The referee raised a flag in Ash's direction. "Gararewl is unable to battle! The winner is Raptorch!"

And as she said that, Gararewl's icon on the screen blacked out, while everybody except Sheldon cheered for Ash's victory.

"Yes! One more Pokemon and Ash will win!" Bonnie shouted, while hugging Dedenne.

"See? I told you that Ash had a strategy in mind!" Serena said, happy that her faith in Ash had been validated once more.

"It looked like making all those potholes on my battleground wasn't just for the fun of it. That was pretty clever, kid," Sheldon praised.

"Thanks! Though, if I'm being honest, I got the idea from you," upon seeing Sheldon's confused face, he added: "When you complained about all the holes my Pokemon were doing with Dig, I realized that a Pokemon as long-legged as Gararewl wouldn't do good on such a terrain."

Sheldon sighed. "Me and my big mouth... oh well, you're going to need something more than a bunch of holes if you want to defeat my last Pokemon. You already got a small taste of its power the other night, but let me assure you, you barely scratched the surface. Go beyond, S51-A!" he said, tossing a pokeball forward.

The capture device opened once it touched the ground, releasing the strange looking Pokemon, while a picture of it appeared on the last slot on Sheldon's side of the screen. S51-A fixed its mismatched eyes on Raptorch, and scowled, clearly remembering how the little lizard ambushed it the other night.

Everybody noticed that S51-A was now wearing a bracelet with a peculiar round gemstone attached to it on its right wrist. If what they saw of other Gym Leaders was of any indication, they knew what to expect.

"Raptorch versus S51-A, begin!" the referee said, lowering the flags.

"Raptorch, Flamethrower!" Ash ordered.

Raptorch took a deep breath, and released a huge stream of flames towards the UFO Pokemon.

"Teleport," Sheldon said in an almost bored tone. "Followed by Dark Pulse."

S51-A flickered for an instant before vanishing and reappearing behind Raptorch.

"Behind you, Raptorch!" Ash warned.

Too late. S51-A appeared behind the Fire Dino Pokemon, a sphere of darkness already between its cupped hands. Thrusting its hands forward, it cast a beam of darkness at Raptorch, hitting him squarely and sending him rolling backwards.

"Raptorch! Please, get up!" Ash pleaded.

Much to Ash's relief, Raptorch managed to get up, though not without difficulty. Suddenly, a red burning aura appeared around the small Fire Dino Pokemon, as his eyes glowed with orange lights as if they were burning coals and the flame at the end of his tail burned with more intensity.

"RAAAAAAAAAAAP!" Raptorch screeched.

"Is that... Blaze?" Ash asked. "Alright, we still can win this! Get ready Raptorch!"

"No, you won't. Finish him off with Psybeam!" Sheldon ordered.

"Avoid it with Dig!" Ash commanded.

As the UFO Pokemon fired a multicolored energy beam at Raptorch, the Fire Dino Pokemon quickly dug underground, adding yet another hole to the battleground. Raptorch quickly appeared under where S51-A was hovering over.

"Teleport!" Sheldon called.

"Turn around and use Flamethrower!" Ash shouted.

S51-A vanished from where it was floating before Raptorch could attack it from below. However, the Fire and Ground-type Pokemon turned around, took a deep breath, and exhaled yet another wave of flames, far bigger than those he used before, with a fire burning so hot it produced ripples in the air, seemingly at an empty spot just a second before S51-A materialized exactly there, taking the brunt of the attack.

The UFO Pokemon cried in a horrible distorted screech as the empowered super effective move washed over him.

"Meteor Mash!" Sheldon angrily ordered.

Still wreathed in flames, S51-A curled one hand into a fist, which glowed with a silvery light, and dashed towards Raptorch, who was

still exhaling a torrent of painful flames, before delivering a brutal swing. The fist connected, producing an explosion of silvery stars that sent Raptorch flying backwards, before falling on the ground with a loud thud.

"Raptorch!" Ash cried.

Upon seeing that the Tandorian Starter didn't make any attempts to get back to his feet, the referee raised a flag in Sheldon's direction. "Raptorch is unable to battle! The winner is S51-A!"

Ash sighed, and returned his defeated Pokemon to his pokeball, as his icon on the screen was blacked out. "Thank you buddy. You did way more than I could have hoped for."

After all, even with only one opponent down, Raptorch managed to stand up to the Gym Leader's entire team in his first official battle.

"That little guy is sure tough, to last as long as he did. Somebody would think that sending a recently caught Pokemon against a Gym Leader would be foolish, but you managed to whip him into shape in such a short amount of time!" Sheldon praised.

"What can I say? Raptorch was eager to learn, and I was just as eager to train him," Ash said, as he chose his final Pokemon. "Now, the other night your S51-A was engaged in a battle with one of my Pokemon before it was interrupted, and I'm sure the two of them would love to see that fight to the end. Metalynx, I choose you!"

As the pokeball hit the ground, it released the Grass and Steel-type Pokemon, who announced her presence with a mighty roar. Both Metalynx and S51-A glared at each other, the two of them remembering their last, inconclusive battle.

"Metalynx vs S51-A, begin!" the referee said, lowering both her flags.

"Hey, is that a Mega Stone I see on her collar?" Sheldon asked, adjusting his glasses, as his eyes focused on said object. "Say, have

you Mega Evolved her before?"

"I did, but only for sparring. Not in a serious battle yet," Ash explained, as his lips curved into a smirk.

Sheldon smirked back, as he turned his tie around, revealing a pin with a Keystone on it. "You know what they say, kid! No time like the present! Plus, given that you already saw what my S51-A can do on its own, I think I should show you what a monster it becomes when it Mega evolves!" he touched the Keystone, which began to glow. "Come on S51-A! Through our bond, you shall break your natural limits and your power will fly past the sky! Mega Evolve!"

Both the Keystone and the Mega Stone attached to S51-A's bracelet began to glow, and fired beams of different colors towards each other. The beams clashed, and merged into one, and the UFO Pokemon began to glow as its body changed, the helix of Mega Evolution flashed before it once the transformation was finished.

"Behold my S51-A at the height of its power!" Sheldon boasted.

S51-A no longer looked like an UFO, but more like a tank, its metal body incredibly bulky and sturdy, with two cannons at each side of the glass dome. It had doubled the number of arms coming out of its main body, which also acted as legs since it no longer floated in the air. The creature inside the vehicle was still green with mismatched yellow and blue eyes, but the dark green mark on its forehead was now in the shape of a T rather than a triangle. Its two pointy ears were now much longer, and had two tiny horns at each side of the head.

Ash held his shuriken necklace with one hand, as he touched the Keystone inside it with the other. "I guess you leave me no option: Come on Metalyx! Let's show him that together we're so much stronger! Mega Evolve!"

The same process as with S51-A happened to Metalyx as she reached her Mega Evolved form.

Sheldon smiled giddily. "Ah, a battle between two Mega Evolved Pokemon! I can't even remember the last time I saw one!"

"In that case, we'll make sure this is a battle you'll always remember!" Ash hotly shouted.

"I'll be holding you to that boast! S51-A, open with Laser Pulse!" Sheldon said.

Laser Pulse. That was an attack that Serena had never seen before, and judging by his expression, neither did Ash, who watched as bluish-white particles of light gathered at each of the cannons at the sides of the UFO Pokemon's main body, before firing twin energy streams of the same color.

"Jump over it, and follow with an Energy Ball!" Ash ordered.

"Teleport!"

The Armored Pokemon jumped over the twin light blue energy bolts as it charged a green sphere of energy between her jaws, firing it once her feet touched the ground again, careful not to accidentally land near a hole. The verdant projectile sailed towards the UFO Pokemon, but this vanished before the attack could connect.

"No fair! If the alien thingy keeps teleporting, then Metalynx won't be able to land a single hit!" Bonnie complained.

"Teleport is a powerful evasive move, but it's not infallible. Raptorch was able to score a hit, after all," Clemont said. "I'm sure that Ash will be able to find a way around it."

"Dark Pulse again!" Sheldon ordered, just as S51-A appeared at one of Metalynx's flanks.

"Parry with Metal Claw!" Ash shouted, realizing his Pokemon had no window to dodge.

S51-A's twin cannons fired a stream of dark and purple energy at Metalynx, whose arm blade began to glow with a silvery light, and swung it at the incoming blasts. The Armored Pokemon was pushed backwards, but Metalynx's huge blade coming out of her metallic front leg made for a surprisingly effective shield, keeping the dark power there until it dispelled on its own.

"Now follow up with X-Scissor!" Ash ordered.

"Teleport again and Psybeam!" Sheldon followed.

"Meta!" Metalynx growled, as she leaped towards S51-A, the claws on the front legs glowing with a greenish-yellow light, before delivering an X-shaped slash. However, Metalynx only ended up hitting thin air once again.

S51-A reappeared behind Metalynx, and blasted her with a multicolored beam fired from its eyes. Metalynx whined in pain as the attack smashed into her, even if it wasn't all that harmful.

"I saw you battle my S51-A that night, Ash, and it was totally kicking your Metalynx's sharp ass," Sheldon pointed out. "And it would have won if that Raptorch had not intervened. But not only is S51-A fighting under my guidance now, no one will come to help your Pokemon."

"Metalynx doesn't need any help! She's strong enough to beat your Pokemon on her own!" Ash boasted.

"Ly, lynx!" Metalynx roared in agreement.

"By how the battle is going, that sounds like an empty boast to me," Sheldon said, adjusting his glasses. "Laser Pulse."

Energy particles began to quickly gather around the mouth of the two cannons, forming red orbs.

Ash's eyes grew wide. "Metalynx, quickly, dodge them!" he commanded, his voice carrying more urgency than usual.

The UFO Pokemon fired twin beams of energy, crimson red this time around. Metalynx was able to swiftly dodged the harmful streams, hissing as one of them graced her side.

"Energy Ball!" Ash shouted.

"Teleport, and Dark Pulse," Sheldon replied.

As it happened before, Metalynx formed another sphere of green energy between her jaws, before firing at her foe. And as it happened before, S51-A teleported just before being hit by the emerald orb, reappearing at Metalynx's right, Dark Pulse ready to fire.

"Block it with Metal Claw again!" Ash ordered.

Facing S51-A, Metalynx's arm blade glowed with a silvery light, and lifted it to parry the twin streams of darkness, a good chunk of its energy remaining on it. However, instead of dispelling as it happened before, the dark power began to swirl around the blade, looking as if the metal was absorbing it, before releasing the energy in the form of a focused and stable blade of darkness superimposed over the metal blade.

"Is that...?" Bonnie asked.

"Night Slash! She must have learned it by combining the energy of Dark Pulse with Metal Claw!" Clemont excitedly said.

"Whoa... it looks different from Greninja's," Serena observed.

"Yes! Well done Metalynx!" Ash congratulated the feline.

"Yes, yes, very good, Metalynx. Learn all the new attacks you want, they won't be of any help if you can touch S51-A," Sheldon said, unimpressed. "Laser Pulse again."

Once again, energy particles began to gather around the Steel and Psychic-type's cannons, this time yellow in color. Ash's eyes widened again, though this time it was more because of excitement over an unexpected opportunity rather than urgency.

"Metalynx, weather the attack and use Night Slash!" Ash quickly told her, much to Sheldon's surprise. "It won't be able to teleport while it attacks!"

While Metalynx didn't look so sure, she decided to trust her trainer, and dashed towards her opponent, as her arm blade was coated in dark power. S51-A fired the attack, colored an electric yellow, the two energy streams smashing against Metalynx, but the Armored Pokemon managed to plow through them without much inconvenience.

"Quickly, tele-" Sheldon was about to say, but not fast enough, as Metalynx was able to reach close combat range and delivered a brutal swipe at his Pokemon, making it recoil in pain, while letting out a horrible, otherworldly screech of pain.

"Yes! Direct hit!" Bonnie cheered. "About time!"

"So..." Sheldon began, sounding a little mysterious. "You finally found my little secret, didn't you?"

Ash smirk was all the answer he needed, but the teen decided to elaborate. "It's the colors, isn't it? At first I thought it was like a Tri-Attack, but then... During this battle and the one the other night, I realized that Metalynx could resist the attack better or worse depending on the color. Red did the most damage, and yellow did the least. And each color represents a type, I'm going to guess Fire for red, Electric for yellow, and Ice for blue. But said color is chosen randomly, otherwise it would use the red one all the time."

Sheldon began to clap slowly. "Bravo, Ash! Yep, you dissected the attack flawlessly!" the Gym Leader praised. "Some might call Laser Pulse an unreliable attack, given its random nature, but you have no

idea how many trainers are thrown into a loop by it! Though, guess that the Feleng is out of the bag, I better not use that attack anymore."

"That's far from the only trick of yours I learned how to counter, Sheldon," Ash confidently stated.

"Oh, you think so?" Sheldon replied, his tone matching Ash's bravado. "Very well then! S51-A, Teleport and Psybeam!"

"Metalynx, Iron Tail in a wide circle around you!" Ash quickly ordered.

"What!?"

As the UFO Pokemon flickered before disappearing, Metalynx's sword-like tail glowed with a metallic sheen, before spinning in a circle, delivering a wide circular swipe around her. S51-A reappeared behind her left flank, just in time to be struck by the attack. The alien-like Pokemon screeched in pain, its attack interrupted by the unexpected counter.

"Yes! Now follow up with X-Scissors!" Ash said, thrusting a fist forward.

"Quickly, Teleport!" Sheldon urged.

Unfortunately, S51-A was unable to regain its bearings in time, and the Armored Pokemon delivered a powerful X-shaped double swipe with her front claws coated in greenish-yellow glowing aura.

"Yes! Go Ash and Metalynx! Show them who's boss!" Bonnie cheered, bouncing on her seat.

"See Bonnie? I told you that Ash would figure out a way around the Teleport," Clemont told her.

"Yeah. There's no such thing as an invincible strategy," Serena added. "Once Ash sees a tactic in action enough times, he'll figure out a way to counter it."

"That makes two attacks that won't work against us anymore!" Ash boasted. "Energy Ball!"

"Nonsense! All S51-A has to do is teleport out of range of Iron Tail!" Sheldon countered, stammering a little. "Teleport and use Dark Pulse!"

Metalynx fired yet another missile of emerald light at S51-A, which quickly teleported to Metalynx's left, this time far enough from close combat range, as it prepared the Dark-type move.

"To your left, Metalynx! Use Night Slash to block the attack!" Ash replied, sure of his words. "If it does that, it won't be able to ambush us fast enough!"

Metalynx turned to the left, and began to dash towards S51-A, just a second before the UFO Pokemon fired twin streams of dark power. Metalynx's blade on her left front leg began to glow with a black and purple aura while growing in size, before launching herself blade-first towards S51-A. The Night Slash cut through the Dark Pulse, and the Armored Pokemon delivered a swipe at the UFO Pokemon's glass dome, cracking it.

"S51-A! Resist!" Sheldon cried.

"Energy Ball at point blank range!" Ash shouted.

Before the alien-looking Pokemon had any time to react, Metalynx blasted it with a close range Energy Ball that ended up shattering its glass dome, leaving its organic part completely exposed.

"And finish it off with Night Slash!" Ash said.

This time, not only was Metalyx's blade arm covered in a coat of darkness, but so was her tail, in a way that reminded Serena of how Vitor's Leafeon would use Aerial Ace and Leaf Blade with both its tail and the leaf on its forehead. And just like her fellow Grass-type,

Metalynx delivered first a swipe with her blade arm, before spinning around and following up with a powerful swipe of her tail.

The attack sent S51-A rolling backwards, before it collapsed on the spot, the power of Mega Evolution fading as it returned to its normal form, lying on the ground, motionless.

The referee raised a flag in Ash's direction. "S51-A can't fight anymore, the winner is Metalynx! And since Sheldon has lost three Pokemon, that means Ash is the winner!"

"YES!" Ash shouted, jumping into the air with a fist held.

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu cried, sharing his trainer 's joy.

"Ash! You did it!" Serena said, leaving the spectator's zone and running towards him, Clemont and Bonnie trailing behind her.

"You and Metalynx totally kicked ass!" Bonnie shouted.

"Such a magnificent victory!" Clemont praised.

Metalynx let out a sigh of exhaustion as she also returned to her normal form, though unlike her defeated foe, she didn't collapse. The armored Pokemon then walked towards Ash, and began to run her head against his body affectionately.

"Hey, good job, girl! You were amazing," Ash said, while scratching the large feline under the ear, making her purr in satisfaction.

"You know Ash, when you came to my Gym, I thought I had finally found somebody I could call my equal," Sheldon said, as he walked towards the Kantonian trainer. "But in the end, you turned out to be my superior. Congratulations for a well earned victory. The Pixel Badge is yours. Treasure it well, it's the first badge I hand out in a long time!"

Sheldon handed Ash his prize, a badge shaped like a black square with silver edges, and four smaller squares of four different colors

each (red, blue, green and yellow) on its corners. Ash gratefully took the badge, and with a triumphal grin, raised it above his head.

"I won the Pixel Badge!" Ash shouted.

"Pi, pikachu!"

"Congratulations, Ash! You're halfway there!" Serena said.

"Thanks!" Ash said, as he placed his newest badge inside his badge case with the other three. He then turned at Sheldon. "Hey, Sheldon, are there any other Gyms near this town?"

"Quite a few yes," the bespectacled man said. "Though, if you want a true challenge, maybe you should try Tiko, the Gym Leader of Amaree Town. He's the toughest Gym Leader of West Tandor, with only the Big Three of East Tandor being above him in terms of difficulty."

"In that case, that shall be our next stop!" Ash excitedly said.

"Not really. The next contest is in Legen Town in a few days, Ash, so we'll need to go there first," Serena told him.

"Oh, right! Sorry, hehe, guess I got carried away..." Ash chuckled awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck.

...

The sun was already setting by the time the group left Sheldon's Gym -it seemed Ash's battle had been way longer than any of them realized- so they all headed back to the Pokemon Center, where they got dinner and turned in for bed early. And the next day, after a good night of sleep, the gang of four had their energy recharged and were ready to continue their journey through Tandor.

Author's Note: So following Serena winning her fourth ribbon, Ash snags his fourth badge! So it's accurate to say that with this chapter, we're (more or less) on the midway point of this story. While I haven't finished writing this story yet, I imagine that it will be about 70-75 chapters long, give or take.

I hope you guys enjoyed the Gym Battle as much as I enjoyed writing it (Sheldon is a pretty fun character to write), which included a couple of debuts: Raptorch's first Gym Battle (and first battle overall outside of training, though he isn't new on that regard) as well as the first time Ash uses a Mega Evolved Pokemon. But as you could see, Mega Metalynx raised to the challenge and then some.

Dunsparce's Ancient Power failing after being used many times in a row is my attempt to translate PP to the anime, more specifically moves with powerful effects but low PP. That way, I can keep them from being too overpowered.

Given that one of Ash's Pokemon evolved mid-battle in his last two Gym Battles, I thought it would be funny if the opposite happened, so I had Sheldon's Dearewl evolve into Gararewl mid battle instead. It really sucks when it happens against you, isn't it? Fortunately it wasn't enough to cost Ash the battle.

Thanks to 61394, Jake, BrightNova169, Fox McCloude, hirowriter, MegaSalamence64 and Viror-kun for reviewing the last chapter, as well as special thanks to Viroro-kun for his work as betareader, whose edits and suggestions made this chapter so much better.

Next time, our heroes continue their journey and meet an old friend along the way. In the meantime, drop a review with your thoughts on this chapter :)

Resting and Learning

Chapter 36:

Resting and Learning

Route 11

After the autumn-looking Routes of Tancoon Way, Pahar Hills and Rochfale, the beaches of Tandor Sheets and Bealbeach, and the endless crops and farmlands of the Wheatfields and Vinoville, the lush, exuberant greenery of Route 11, also known as the Nature Preserve, was a welcome change of scenery, both the vast fields of grass and beautiful and large trees.

Naturally, plants weren't the only thing they could see, as they were many Pokemon roaming the green expanses: wild Baashaun grazing -and these ones looked far less docile than those seen in the farms- a pack of Tancoon running around, lead by a trio of Tanscure, some Gligar flying above the trees, and an Ekans that quickly hid under the tall grass.

Given the linear nature of the route, its gentle, downward slope, and lack of big obstacles, they surmised it wouldn't take them more than a day to reach Legen Town.

"And the contest is in three days. Meaning once we'll get there, I'll have enough time to prepare for it," Serena said.

"Heh, I can't wait for you to win your fifth ribbon, Serena. You're so close!" Bonnie said.

Serena smiled. "Yeah, I can't wait either. And that way, we won't have to worry about future contests in order to decide where to go next."

"Though, it's not that it's such a bother," Ash gently countered. "Gyms aren't going anywhere, so it's not that I'm in a hurry to challenge them."

"You could have fooled us, given how you act when we reach a city or town with a Gym," Clemont said in good nature.

"Pi, pika," Pikachu agreed.

Ash merely chuckled. "Well, that's because I get really excited about challenging them, you know? But I don't mind waiting a little bit for the sake of others," he said. "Besides, I think we're doing a pretty good time. There's still months until the Pokemon League begins, more than enough time to get the remaining badges. Even those from East Tandor."

"Of course you'd want to challenge the Big Three," Serena said.

"I made a promise to Vaeryn to fight him again, didn't I? Especially now that I'm on my way to master Mega Evolution," Ash said. "Plus, how can I be ready for the League if I can't beat the strongest Gym Leaders? Besides, I'm sure Alain, Natalie and Theo are aiming for them too."

"Alain? Definitely. Natalie? I can see that," Clemont began. "But Theo? I don't think so. That guy doesn't seem to deal well with adversity."

"Come on Clemont, cut him some slack. The guy's a bit of an immature brat, yes-" Ash began.

"Just a bit?" Bonnie deadpanned, raising an eyebrow.

"-but he has just started his journey, and is finding out that it's not like he expected. But if he perseveres, all his experiences will make him grow into a better person," Ash countered.

"The way you talk, it almost sounds like you already saw people like Theo before," Clemont noticed.

"You can say that. In fact, I kinda see a little of myself in Theo, you know?" Ash said.

"You? Like Theo?" Serena asked, before letting out a little chuckle. "Sorry Ash, but I can't see it."

"I'm serious! When I started my journey, I was kind of a brat too. I thought I was awesome and that I would blow through every obstacle in the way without breaking a sweat," Ash began. "Yet I wasn't even able to make Pikachu listen to me."

"Piii..." Pikachu softly cried as an apology.

"It's okay, buddy. I admit I wasn't the most understanding trainer either," Ash reassured his starter, gently petting him on the head. "But the first few days after leaving home... Well, they were quite the eye-openers. I just found how big the world was, and how small I was in comparison. I was boastful, arrogant and believed hard work was below me, and thus I tackled most challenges ill prepared, thinking that I was ready to face anything and that I would prevail because I was determined..."

As Ash gave a recount of his early adventures, especially some particularly painful defeats, Serena tried to imagine the past Ash the present one was describing and... she couldn't. Ash could be a little boastful -okay, more than just a little,- but he was able to back those boasts with actual skill. Arrogant? Quite the opposite. Serena would have never learned of his past accomplishments unless they were related to the topic at hand. And avoiding hard work? Ash loved training with his Pokemon so much, many times he needed to be talked into *stopping* .

But then again... Serena herself wasn't the same person when she left her home town of Vaniville. She lacked drive and perseverance that had to slowly gain, in no small part thanks to Ash inspiring her.

And while Ash would never say it out loud, he knew that was true as well. Maybe that's why Ash had so much faith in Theo. Everybody has the potential to change for the better.

"Hey, speaking of Theo..." Bonnie snapped Serena out of her thoughts, as the girl put her hand just above her eyes. "Isn't that him, over there, besides that big tree?"

The three teens looked into the distance, and they realized that there was indeed somebody, a boy they couldn't recognize from that far away, but the bright red hair with a dash of electric blonde was a dead giveaway of his identity. He was directing two Pokemon in a sparring battle.

"It's him!" Ash said, visibly excited. "Come on, let's go say hi!"

And while Ash didn't break into a run, his pace accelerated into a swift march. As they approached him, they could see that Theo had what they presumed were all his Pokemon out: his initial Orchynx, now a Metalynx, an Eshouten, his Fortog, now a Folerog, his Lunapup, and a small, red, imp-like Pokemon none of them recognized.

"Hey there, Theo!" Ash said, waving at him.

The boy and all his Pokemon turned to the source of the voice, and he waved back at them.

"Oh, it's you guys! It's been a while, huh?" Theo said.

"Since Bealbeach City, if I recall," Clemont said. "A lot of things have happened since the last time we met."

"That's selling it short," Serena muttered, remembering the Nuclear Pokemon invasion on Bealbeach. Theo was surely lucky to have missed that.

"So, what are you doing? Training hard, huh?" Ash asked.

"Yep! I just caught Devimp here not long ago, so I'm getting it up to catch up with the others!" Theo said.

"De, devimp!" the Pokemon in question cried happily upon being mentioned.

"You have a new Pokemon? Neat!" Ash said, as he took his Pokedex to scan it.

"Devimp, the Imp Pokemon. Fire/Dark. A Pokémon that is said to come from a separate plane of existence. It is very curious about the world around it and often gets into mischief as a result," the Pokedex explained.

Devimp was a devil-looking Pokemon, a bit shorter than Bonnie, whose body was bright red, except for three black circle-like spots on its chest. It had a tail ending on an arrowtip, and two small horns that curved upwards. A single flame floated between them.

"You got yourself quite the interesting Pokemon, Theo," Ash told him, putting the Pokedex away.

"Yep! Devimp is a perfect fit for my team!" Theo proudly boasted. "So, I see you guys are coming from Vinoville?"

"Exactly! Ash just beat Sheldon and got his fourth badge, so now we're heading towards Legen Town, so Serena can win her last ribbon!" Bonnie happily explained.

"You have four badges already!?" Theo asked in shock, before pushing the surprise out of his body, forcing his body language to be more relaxed. "Eh, sure, I have four badges too! Sheldon was hardly a challenge for my awesome team, haha! Had you guys arrived earlier, you would have seen my Pokemon wiping the floor with his team!" Theo said. He was trying to sound like his usual boastful self, but he sounded more stiff and unnatural than usual, as if he was trying to put on a facade.

Something everybody else, including Ash, was able to tell, but they chose not to say anything.

Well, Ash, Serena and Clemont chose not to.

"Really? Can we see your badge case then?" Bonnie asked, crossing her arms, as she eyed the redheaded boy suspiciously.

Bonnie's question made Theo look like a Deerling in headlights. Still, the boy managed to regain his composure. "Eh... maybe later. I have the case in my backpack and I don't feel like getting it out..."

Ash, Serena and Clemont looked at each other. Despite not trading a single word, their looks made the other two know that they also reached the same conclusion.

"You know, Theo," Ash said, taking a step forward, his voice taking on a conciliatory tone. "You don't have to lie to us, you know. We aren't going to mock you or judge you if you lose against Sheldon. Heck, I barely won myself!"

Theo looked stiff. Except for his legs, which were visibly trembling. "What? Why do you think I'm lying? I beat Sheldon, I swear!"

"Really? Because when Sheldon gave Ash his badge, he also said it was the first badge he had handed out in a long time," Clemont pointed out. As his words left his lips, Theo's face lost all trace of color.

"Wh-what...?" Theo sputtered. "Th-There's no way...!"

"In fact," Clemont continued, pushing his glasses back. "That's why you caught and are training that Devimp, didn't you? A Fire-type would give you an edge against Sheldon's Steel-type team."

Right now, it wasn't just his legs, but his whole body that was trembling, though given his clenched teeth and curled fists, it was more trembling of rage and impotence rather than fear.

Theo couldn't take any more. "Okay, fine, I lied! I fought against Sheldon, but he beat me! There, are you happy now!?" he yelled, before turning around and crossing his arms.

Ash placed a comforting hand on Theo's shoulder. "It's okay, Theo. Like I said before, no one's going to think less of you because you don't win all the time. Everybody loses sometime."

"What do you know about losing, mr. 'I'm such an experienced and seasoned trainer', huh?" Theo snapped at him.

Theo's hostility had no effect on Ash. "When I said that everybody loses, I was talking about myself as well. I've known quite a lot of defeats, from fun spars, all the way to big championships, to everything in between. In fact, when I first faced Maria, she totally kicked my ass."

"R-Really?" Theo asked, sounding a little surprised.

"From your point of view, Ash may look invincible. But that's only because he has much more experience than you," Serena interceded. "He didn't start out as an expert trainer, you know? There was a time where he was a beginner just like you. We were all beginners at some point."

Theo didn't say anything, but Serena's words seemed to have an effect on him, as the redheaded boy appeared to be more at ease.

"So, since we're here, would you like it if Ash helped you train, Theo?" Serena offered. "I believe you improved a lot under the short time you trained under Ash back when we met at the Baa Grasslands, and given that Ash fought Sheldon, he could help you prepare for your eventual rematch."

Taken a little aback, Ash looked at Serena in surprise. "Sure I'd love to help Theo, but what about you, Serena? The next contest will be coming soon. Wouldn't you prefer me to train with you?"

"It's okay Ash. I think I can do without you for a single day. Plus, this will be a good opportunity for Theo," Serena stated, before looking at the younger boy. "What do you say?"

"Alright..." Theo conceded.

"In that case, let's set camp here for the time being!" Ash declared to no one's objections.

...

As Ash had stated, they set up their camp on the same spot as Theo's, and immediately let all their Pokemon out. Ash and Theo brought theirs to a nice clearing next to a small lake that could make for a great training spot, leaving Serena enough room for her to train near the camp. Since Ash was going to train with Theo, Serena had asked Clemont to be her sparring partner this time around.

Given that Bonnie didn't feel to be near Theo, she decided to stick with Serena and her brother this time around.

"So, is there any Pokemon you'd like me to use in our spar, Serena?" the lemon blond asked.

Serena placed a finger under her chin, pensive. "How about Nucleon and Geigeroach?"

The answer surprised the inventor. "Those two? Are you expecting your contest rivals to have Nuclear Pokemon?"

"Alain managed to catch one, so I wouldn't rule it out," Serena said. "It never hurts to be prepared."

"Very well. Nucleon, Geigeroach, time to battle!" Clemont called.

"Nu!"

"Roach."

As the two Nuclear-types moved forward, Serena turned around to pick her first two Pokemon.

"Plus, there's another reason as for why I want you to use those two," Serena began, as she scanned her six Pokemon. "Alright, I think I'll go first with-"

"SYYYYYYL!" Sylveon let out a high pitched cry, before quickly hiding behind Braixen.

Serena sighed. "This is also why I wanted to spar against Nuclear-types. Come on Sylveon, Nucleon and Geigeroach are our friends, they aren't going to hurt you."

"Syl! Syl! Veon!" Sylveon cried while quickly shaking her head with her eyes shut.

"Sylveon, I know you had a harrowing experience with Nuclear-type Pokemon, and I'm not going to force you to face your fear but..." Serena began. "You'll have to do it sooner or later."

"Veooooon... !" judging by Sylveon's reaction, she had chosen 'later'.

"Nu..." Nucleon sadly whined, as he dejectedly walked away.

"Nucleon..." Clemont said.

"Let him be. I don't think he's going to be in a great mood for battling," Serena advised.

"Maybe it's for the best," he agreed. "Chespin! Come on, take Nucleon's place."

"Ches, chespin!" Chespin happily said, ready to prove himself one more time.

"As for my Pokemon, Braixen, Quetzoral, you go first!"

As the Fox and the Canopy Pokemon walked in front of Serena, the rest of her Pokemon sat down next to Bonnie in order to watch the spar.

"Braixen, Hidden Power! Quetzroal, Razor Leaf!" Serena ordered.

"Counter the Hidden Power with Vine Whip, Chespin, and use Sludge Wave, Geigeroach!" Clemont replied.

With that exchange of moves as their opening, the battle began. Bonnie could easily tell how much Serena had improved since she started sparring with Ash. Back in Kalos, there's no way Serena could have been able to keep up with her brother without the latter holding back -which definitely wasn't the case here- but now? Serena had now power and sound tactics on top of the grace and elegance she acquired while she trained for showcases.

"Quetzroal, Drill Peck on Geigeroach!" Serena ordered.

"Chespin, block it with Iron Head!" Clemont shouted.

Bonnie couldn't help but feel a little pride whenever Chespin used his newest move, the very first move he learned since Clemont ever caught him. Back in the day, Chespin loved to do nothing more than eat and laze around, and only fought when he had to. But now? After a little encouragement, he was much more active in both training and battling.

He still ate a lot, but hey, baby steps.

"Well done, Geigeroach! Now, Nuclear Slash!" Clemont shouted.

"Dodge, and Energy Ball! Braixen, Psybeam!" Serena replied.

In fact... Why stop there? While her brother was busy with Chespin and Geigeroach, she could spend some time training his other Pokemon. It would serve as even more practice for when she finally started her journey in a few months.

"Now who could I train next...?" she began, as she scanned Clemont's Pokemon sitting next to her, but noticed that only Luxray and Bunnelby were there. She didn't expect Nucleon to be there, but where was Eletux?

She didn't take long to find him, as the Hippocampus Pokemon was walking towards Nucleon, who was resting under the shade of a tree, looking gloomy. Driven by curiosity, she followed him.

"Ele, eletux!" Eletux cried happily, as he began to bounce around Nucleon, almost like an hyperactive child who wanted to play.

Though, did he really want to play, or did he want to cheer Nucleon up? If he wanted to play he could have badgered any other Pokemon of Clemont, after all, yet he went after Nucleon.

"Nu..." Nucleon whined, moved one paw as if to push Eletux away.

"Ele, ele!" Eletux insisted. The Water and Electric-type wasn't planning on leaving anytime soon, it looked.

"Come on Eletux, leave Nucleon alone. He's a little sad right now," Bonnie asked the Tandorian starter. "If you are bored, Dedenne and I will play with you, okay?"

"Nene?" Dedenne asked, looking at his trainer.

"Ele?" Eletux asked, titling his head at her.

"How about if we toss you a ball, and you toss it back with Water gun?" Bonnie suggested.

"Tux, ele, eletux!" The Hippocampus Pokemon seemed to like the idea, as he bounced excitedly from one side to another.

"Great! Wait here, I'll go fetch the ball!" Bonnie happily said, as she skipped towards Clemont's backpack, where the inflatable ball was. After blowing it up -it could be automatically inflated by merely

pressing a button- the young girl returned to Eletux. "Alright, let's go find a spot where we won't get in the way of the others."

"Tux?" Eletux asked, and motioned his head at Nucleon.

"Just let him be. I don't think he's in the mood for playing," Bonnie said.

Fortunately, the promise of fun and entertainment was enough for Eletux to stop bothering Nucleon, even if his intention was to help his depressed teammate.

"Alright Eletux, here it goes!" Bonnie said, tossing the ball at him.

And thus they began their game, where Bonnie would toss the ball at him, and the Tandorian starter would use Water Gun to send it back at her. Though sometimes he would hit it with his head or even his tail. There were also sometimes where Dedenne tried to hit the ball as well, but his small size meant the ball wouldn't go far -and more often than not, he would end up knocked on his back by the ball.

"Very well, Eletux! You have proved to be a worthy playmate!" Bonnie said, as she grabbed the ball Eletux had sent at her. "But are you good enough to withstand my ultimate move? The Super Amazing Explosion Kick!"

Bonnie kicked the ball at Eletux in a high arc. As the Hippocampus Pokemon prepared to send it back at her with a Water Gun or a well aimed headbutt, both human and Pokemon realized that Bonnie had put way more strength into her kick, as it sailed past Eletux and was heading towards Nucleon, still lying on the grass, unaware of the rubbery meteor heading his way.

"Oh no, the ball will hit Nucleon! Curse my unbridled strength!" Bonnie cried, as she and Eletux ran towards the Atomic Pokemon. "Nucleon, watch out!"

Nucleon raised his head, his detached ears perking up upon hearing Bonnie's warning. His three eyes quickly located the ball heading for him. Jumping to his feet, Nucleon gave the ball a solid headbutt, bouncing it back at Bonnie, who quickly caught it.

"Well done, Nucleon!" Bonnie praised. "You've got moves! Anyway, sorry for that. We'll go a bit further so this doesn't happen again."

She led Eletux to another spot further away, but still close enough so her brother could see her. However, she stopped, feeling like somebody was following them. Turning around, said feeling was validated when she saw Nucleon doing that. The Nuclear-type appeared a bit startled that Bonnie had heard him.

"Nucleon? Do you want something?" Bonnie asked.

Nucleon didn't say anything, and averted Bonnie's gaze. He appeared to be bashful.

Bonnie's lips curved into a smile. "You want to play with us, don't you?"

"Nu..." he bashfully said.

"Aw, come on, no need to be embarrassed! The more the better! Let's go!" Bonnie said.

"Nene!"

"Ele, tux!"

And thus, Nucleon joined Bonnie and Eletux in the fun they were having.

...

"Alright Devimp, Fire Punch again!" Theo ordered.

"Deeeeee!" Devimp cried as it leaped towards Greninja, one of its fists wreathed in flames.

The Ninja Pokemon didn't need to be told to create a Water Shuriken and use it as a makeshift shield. The attack connected, resulting in a hissing noise, producing thin threads of smoke that billowed upwards.

While Serena sparred against Clemont and Bonnie played with the idle Pokemon, Ash helped Theo prepare his rematch against Sheldon. Right now, they were focused on Devimp, who not only was Theo's newest member, and thus in the most need of training in order to catch up, but Theo believed it was key to defeat the Steel-type specialist.

"Great! Devimp has the hang of Fire Punch!" Ash praised.

"Yeah. Guess now it has something better than Ember to rely on," Theo said, though with not much energy. "So, what's next?"

Ash couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at Theo's current demeanor. Normally he'd be ecstatic over one of his Pokemon growing stronger in one way or another, yet he was barely showing any enthusiasm. Did Sheldon's loss affect him that much?

"Theo? Everything's okay?" Ash asked.

Theo was a little startled by the question. He quickly regained his composure, and replied: "Sure! Everything's peachy! Why shouldn't it be?"

"Listen Theo, I know that losing an important match, like those against a Gym Leader, can sting," Ash began. "But it's not the end of the world. You can still try as many times as you can."

"Why are you telling me this?" Theo asked, sounding a little irritated. "I already know that! And I don't care that I lost some dumb Gym match, I'm not a baby!"

"No one's saying that you are," Ash calmly said. "Though, there's something that's clearly bugging you, if it's not your recent loss."

"It's none of your business!" Theo snapped, before angrily turning his back at Ash.

Ash didn't say anything, and merely sighed. "Very well, Theo."

A moment of tense and uncomfortable silence followed. Theo then clenched his fists and gritted his teeth, before kicking some grass. "Why this stupid journey isn't going the way I thought..." he began, without turning around.

"Theo?"

"This was supposed to be my big moment. Where I showed everybody that I'm not just some brat, that I can be as good as Vitor and Natalie, if not better! Everything was great at first, but then everything went downhill, and then... and then..."

"And then...?" Ash repeated.

Theo finally turned around to face Ash, his eyes wet with tears. "It's my dad, okay?"

"Cameron?"

"Yes! After the nuclear plant blew up... he called me, you know?" Theo said, forcing his tears back and wiping his eyes. "He told me that he knew it was no accident, that it could be connected to what happened ten years ago, and that he was going to investigate it. And... I haven't heard from him ever since..."

"Theo..."

"I tried to call him myself many times, but all I get is a stupid message on how his Pokegear is either off or has no connection!" Theo began. "What if something bad happened to him? What if whoever did this caught him? What if... what if he's..."

"Cameron will be fine, Theo," Ash confidently said, placing a reassuring hand on the redhead's shoulder. "And I'm sure that if he hasn't contacted you yet it's because he didn't have the opportunity."

"And how do you know that?" Theo asked, unconvinced.

"Before the first power plant exploded, it was attacked by an army of Nuclear Pokemon. There were so many, there's no way the people there would have been able to leave that place alive," Ash began, sounding ominous, before smiling. "But they all did. And do you know why?"

Theo shook his head.

"Because your dad was there to protect them. Cameron and his Pokemon kept the horde of Nuclear Pokemon at bay while all the people on the island could evacuate," Ash told Theo. "My friend Clemont was there, and saw your father and his Pokemon fight, and he said it was like watching an Elite Four member."

"R-Really?" Theo said, sounding a little more hopeful. He almost seemed surprised to learn how cool and strong his father was.

"Yes. So if we didn't hear about your dad yet, it's because he's probably hidden, hoping to catch the criminals who caused such a catastrophe by surprise before they can strike again," Ash reassured him. "And while he's doing that, he wouldn't like you to worry so much about him, but to continue your journey and keep getting better, so when the two of you reunite again, you can make him proud by showing him what a great trainer you have become."

"Yes... yes!" Theo said, his usual youthful energy slowly returning. "You're right! I can't just stay here moping over something that may not even be true! I need to keep getting better and keep going forward! So I can catch up on Vitor, Natalie, you, everybody! That's what he would want!"

"Well said!" Ash said, slapping him on the back.

"And tomorrow I'm going to show that computer nerd who's boss!" Theo shouted, thrusting a fist into the air, before pointing a finger at Ash. "Fight me Ash! I will show you how much I have improved!"

Ash couldn't help but excitedly smile. "It will be a pleasure."

...

"Pin Missile, Chespin!" Clemont ordered.

"Deflect them with Drill Peck, Quetzoral!" Serena replied. "And Braixen, Hidden Power!"

"Geigeroach, counter with Nuclear Slash!"

The spar between Serena and Clemont had been going on for quite some time, with neither of them appearing to get the upper hand over the other. The four Pokemon were starting to show some signs of exhaustion, meaning that the trainers would soon call off the battle, rest a little, and continue with two new Pokemon.

She would probably be the next one chosen by Serena. Clemont's options were far more limited, since the only two Pokemon there were Luxray and Bunnelby, given that the other two weren't present.

Sylveon was glad that Serena hadn't forced her to battle against those monsters Clemont allowed in his team for some reason. Couldn't he see the danger he posed for him, for her, for everybody in the group? Clearly not. Of course, she knew better than trying to force Clemont to kick them out of the group, so she did the next best thing: try to avoid them as much as she could, and be ready when the danger appeared.

"Razor Leaf, Quetzoral! Set them on fire with Flamethrower, Braixen!" Serena ordered.

"Parry with Half Life and Vine Whip!"

Sylveon couldn't understand how her teammates could be so nonchalant fighting that monster. And Chespin fought *alongside* it.

Even if it wasn't doing anything that warranted being aware of him. But no matter how friendly and like everybody else they appeared, she couldn't relax around them.

Also, now that she thought about it, where was the other? She thought she was lying under a tree, but she couldn't see it anymore.

"Yes, good one Nucleon!" she could hear Bonnie laugh in the distance.

Looking towards the direction of the voice, Sylveon could see Bonnie playing with both Nucleon and Elettix. The three of them were looking to be having a good time, chasing and hitting that rubber ball. Neither the girl nor the Tandorian Pokemon had any trouble playing with the Nuclear-type. Why? How could they be so nonchalant around him?

Sure, those two Pokemon hadn't done anything that would label them as threats, but it was only a matter of time they did, right? Right?

... because it's not that her gut feeling was wrong.

Right?

"They appear to be having a great time, don't you think?"

"Syl!?" Sylveon was a little startled upon hearing Serena addressing her. Was the battle finished already?

Yep, looking around, Braixen and Quetzal had returned with the others, who were congratulating them for such a good battle. Clemont's Pokemon also returned to him, the blond human giving them some treats, which devoured them greedily.

Serena then sat besides her, her eyes still fixed on Bonnie, Nucleon and Eletux. "I know we're training, but if you want to join them, I wouldn't mind."

"Syl, syl!" Sylveon screeched, profusely shaking her head.

"Alright," Serena said, understanding her plight, and placing a comforting hand on her back. "I won't force you to spend time with them if you don't want to."

"Veon..." Sylveon said in relief.

"I understand why you're so wary of Nucleon and Geigeroach, Sylveon," Serena said, as she began to gently pet the Interwinning Pokemon's back. "If I were in your situation, I think I would react the same."

"Syl...?"

"However... Well, you know how Selkid and Minicorn used to belong to those Team Omega criminals, don't you? And their experiences under them, they were... well, not that great, to put it lightly," Serena began. "And after such experiences, it would be normal if they never trusted a human ever again. But I showed them that not all humans are bad, didn't I?"

"S-Syl..." Sylveon weakly nodded.

"So maybe, despite past experiences... maybe not all Nuclear-type Pokemon are bad after all," Serena said. She then got up. "Again, I'm not going to force you to do something you don't want to, just... think about it, okay?"

And with that Serena turned around, and left.

One part of her wanted to call Serena out for underestimating the danger those Pokemon posed. But another part of her claimed that

Serena was much smarter than that, and that she should listen to her.

Maybe if Serena trusted them... perhaps she could give them a chance?

...

Meanwhile, Ash and Theo got ready for their match. They decided to use two Pokemon each, and given that, unlike their previous bout this was a friendly spar, they would do without a referee. Theo started with Devimp, while Ash chose Aveden.

"Are you ready, Theo?" Ash asked.

"Yeah, I'm good to go!" the redhead replied.

"In that case, let's begin!" Ash said. "You can make the first move!"

~Ash (Aveden, ?) VS Theo (Devimp, ?)~

"Alright Devimp, begin with Shadow Ba-no wait!" Theo interrupted himself. "Aveden is part Normal-type, and Shadow Ball has no effect on those Pokemon, right?"

"That would have been a blunder. Thankfully you managed to catch it on time," Ash congratulated him.

"See? I can learn from my mistakes!" Theo proudly said. "Alright, in that case... Ember!"

"Dev, devimp!" Devimp cried in its high pitched voice, before taking a deep breath, and exhaling a flurry of small fireballs.

"Counter with Gust!" Ash ordered.

"Av, Ave!" Aveden whistled, as he began to beat his wings as strongly as he could, creating a powerful wind that snuffed the small fireballs away, while blowing Devimp backwards.

"Yes, well done, Aveden!"

"Hang on, Devimp!" Theo encouraged the Imp Pokemon.

"Follow up with Quick Attack!" Ash commanded.

Aveden beat his wings again to gain a little altitude, before folding them and diving at Devimp like a rocket, leaving a trail of white light behind. The Bliss Bird Pokemon hit Devimp squarely in the chest, sending it rolling backwards.

"Deeeeeeee!" it cried.

"Devimp, no!" Theo said, a little distressed.

"Calm down, Theo! Devimp isn't going down this soon!" Ash told the redhead. "Keep a cool head, and plan a counterattack!"

"Yes, yes, you're right, no use in getting all worked up," Theo agreed. "Alright Devimp, Dark Pulse!"

"Deeeee... !" Devimp formed a sphere of darkness between its cupped hands, in a way similar to Pancham, before thrusting said hands upward, firing a stream of purple and black energy at the Bliss Bird Pokemon.

"Counter with Mirror Shot!" Ash replied.

"Aveeeee!" Aveden whistled, opening his beak as he formed a sphere of silvery light inside it, before firing a beam of the same color.

The two attacks clashed in the middle, unable to overpower the other, resulting in a small explosion.

"Quick Attack again!" Ash ordered.

"Dodge it!" Theo shouted.

Once again, Aveden dived at Devimp at a breakneck speed, cutting the resulting cloud of smoke in half as he dashed through it, leaving a trail of fading white light behind. The Imp Pokemon tried to move away, but it wasn't fast enough to avoid Aveden's attack, the bird slamming into the little demon, knocking it on its back.

"Well done, Aveden!" Ash praised his Pokemon.

"Devimp! Are you okay?" Theo asked. The boy was clearly worried over how his Pokemon had taken quite a few hits already without landing any on Aveden.

"De, devimp!" he cried, as it jumped back on its feet. Theo relaxed, seeing that there was still some fight in the Fire and Dark-type.

"Aveden, Air Cutter!" Ash ordered.

"Den, av!" Aveden whistled, and with a pair of powerful beats of his wings, he sent a pair of blades of compressed air towards Devimp.

"Devimp, counter them with Shadow Ball!" Theo shouted.

"Deeee... !" Devimp brought its hands together, summoning a sphere of pure darkness, before sending it at the incoming wind attacks.

The two attacks collided, resulting in yet another explosion.

"Very well, Theo! Shadow Ball might not have any effect on Aveden, but it can still be used to block or counter attacks of other types!" Ash praised.

"I'm getting better at this thinking outside the box thing, huh?" Theo asked, proudly puffing his chest a hint of his former bravado briefly resurfaced. "Alright Devimp, this is when we counterattack! Rock Tomb!"

"De, imp!" Devimp cried, as it raised its arms while its eyes glowed yellow.

Both Ash and Aveden looked up as several large boulders of various sizes appeared above the latter.

"Quickly, dodge them!"

As gravity took hold of the rocks, they fell down, making a loud thud when they crashed down. Aveden expertly maneuvered around the, but unfortunately for the bird, he was unable to dodge the last one, hitting him with such force he was sent tumbling backwards.

"Aveden!" Ash cried.

"Av, ave!" Aveden cawed, shaking his head in order to get rid of the dizziness.

"Yes! Nice hit, Devimp!" Theo cheered. "Now, Ember!"

"Counter with Air Cutter!" Ash replied.

Devimp exhaled a flurry of small fireballs at the flying Pokemon, while Aveden beat his wings twice, producing yet another pair of blades of compressed air. The attacks collided, with once again no attack overpowering the other, leading to yet another explosion.

"Quick Attack!" Ash quickly shouted.

"Not again! Devimp, Fire Punch!" Theo ordered in return.

Ash Aveden dived at Devimp for the third time, Devimp clenched a tiny hand into a fist, which was quickly coated in flames. Swinging his fist at the approaching bird, the Imp Pokemon delivered a precise right hook at the bird's face, interrupting the Quick Attack.

"Yes, well done, Devimp!" Theo cheered.

"Very good, Theo, you're doing great!" Ash praised.

"Let's follow up with Rock Tomb!" Theo excitedly shouted.

"Aveden, dodge it, quickly!" Ash ordered.

Once again, large boulders of varying sizes appeared above Aveden a second before they fell onto him. The Bliss Bird Pokemon was agile to evade most of them, but Ash could see that there was at least one boulder he couldn't avoid. Something was counting on, but Ash wasn't going to make the same mistake twice.

"Aveden, Mirror Shot!" Ash shouted.

Aveden fired a silvery laser from his beak, cutting the falling boulder in half like a hot knife would cut through butter, before the Steel-type attack hit Devimp in the face, producing a brief flash of light.

"De, devimp!" Devimp cried, as it clutched its eyes.

"Devimp, what's wrong?" Theo asked, worried.

"That's the effect of Mirror Shot. It has the chance to briefly blind a Pokemon," Ash explained.

"What!?"

"And that chance is all that we need! Aveden, Quick Attack!" Ash ordered.

"Ave, avede!" Aveden whistled in agreement.

This time, Devimp was unable to dodge or reply to the attack in kind, and was sent rolling backwards after Aveden slammed into it.

"Now, follow up with Gust!" Ash shouted.

Aveden flapped his wings as fast as he could, generating a powerful tornado around Devimp that lifted it into the air, while violently launching it from one place to another, before the Imp Pokemon was slammed into the ground.

"Devimp... !" Theo shouted.

Devimp was lying on its back, limbs spread around and eyes all swirly. It didn't move.

"I may be no referee, but I'd say that Devimp has been defeated," Ash said.

Theo sighed, wordlessly agreeing with Ash assessment as he returned the Imp Pokemon to its pokeball.

"Guess I was over my head again, thinking I could beat one of your veteran Pokemon with one I just caught, huh?" Theo asked, his voice devoid of the fire it had only a few seconds ago.

"Hey, that's not true! If anything, this battle has shown how much you have improved," Ash quickly replied. "I mean, sure, Aveden won, but he had to work for that victory. The fact that your freshly caught Pokemon was able to keep up and fight a veteran one like an equal says a lot about your skill as a trainer."

This managed to draw a small smile from Theo. "You always have to look at the bright side of things, huh?"

Ash shrugged nonchalantly. "Somebody has to. Come on, this is a two versus two. Choose your next Pokemon."

Theo looked at the spot where his other Pokemon were sitting. After a couple moments of pondering, he made his decision. "Alright Eshouten, let's go!"

"Shou!" Eshouten happily cried, as it hovered in front of Theo, ready to battle.

"We're ready!" Theo said.

"Very well! This time, we'll attack first! Aveden, use Air Cutter!" Ash ordered.

"Air Cutter too, Eshouten!" Theo shouted.

Both Pokemon beat their wings, producing blades of compressed air that flew towards each other. Both attacks clashed in the middle, producing a powerful air blast that blew in every direction.

"Aveden, Quick Attack!" Ash ordered.

"Block with Steel Wing!" Theo replied.

As Aveden barreled towards Eshouten, wings folded and a trail of vanishing white light left behind, Eshouten's wings took on a silvery shine, and hid behind them. There was a loud clang as Aveden smashed headfirst into the Steel-enhanced limbs, the painful bounce sending the bird back reeling.

"Yes! Now give him a good smack!" Theo said, thrusting his first forward.

Eshouten grinned, and delivered a series of swipes and slaps at Aveden with its hardened wings, pushing Aveden back with each hit.

"Aveden, hold on!" Ash cried.

"And finish him off with Confusion!" Theo excitedly shouted, already savoring victory.

Eshouten's eyes glowed with a pink light, as an outline of the same color surrounded Aveden. Then, as if he was being held by a pair of invisible arms, the Bliss Bird Pokemon was slammed against the ground multiple times, making him squeal in pain with each hit.

"Aveden!" Ash cried again.

The last slam was so powerful, it cracked a crater open in the ground. It was also strong enough to beat the last shreds of vitality of Aveden's body, knocking him out cold.

"Yes! I knocked one of Ash's Pokemon out!" Theo cried in joy.

"Es, shou!" Eshouten cawed, sharing his trainer's happiness.

The shock on Ash's face was short lived, as it was replaced by serene acceptance and vicarious joy over seeing how much Theo had improved.

"Well done, Aveden, take a good rest," Ash said, recalling his first Tandorian Pokemon back to his pokeball. "And well job to you too, Theo. You trained your Pokemon well."

"Well, truth be told, Devimp did a good job softening Aveden up, otherwise Eshouten wouldn't have won so quickly," Theo said. Well, admitting something that would undermine his victory wasn't something the Theo Ash had met in Moki Town or the Baa Grasslands would have done. "Let's see if we can take down your second Pokemon."

"Right," Ash said, before looking at the spot where all his other Pokemon were. He didn't take long to make his decision. "Frosulo, I choose you!"

"Fro, fro!" The Ice Crystal Pokemon happily chirped, as he hopped towards the battleground as well as he could.

Theo raised an eyebrow at Ash's choice, but refrained from making any comments. It seemed like he was learning not to judge a book by its cover.

"Let's begin," Ash told him.

"Very well! Eshouten, Shadow Ball!" Theo ordered.

"Shoooooooo... !" Eshouten cried as it opened its mouth, forming a sphere of darkness in front of it, which shot towards the Ice Crystal Pokemon.

"Deflect it with Shadow Claw, Frosulo!" Ash commanded.

"Fro, su!" Frosulo chirped as he generated a clawed arm made of the same ghostly energy as the Shadow Ball, and used it to swipe

the projectile away.

"Whoa! So that's how a Pokemon without arms can use Shadow Claw?" Theo asked, genuinely impressed. "Oh well, that was just a minor setback! Eshouten, Air Cutter!"

"Sho, shouten!" Eshouten cried, giving a pair of powerful wing beats, sending a pair of blades of compressed air.

"Counter with Powder Snow!" Ash replied.

Frosulo took a deep breath, and exhaled a powerful cold wind with snowflakes in it. The sudden frigid air undid the blades of compressed air, while pelting Eshouten with the hard snowflakes, making the Observer Pokemon whine in pain.

"What's with that ice bug? Nothing I throw at him works, and he hasn't even moved!" Theo complained.

"If a direct assault doesn't work, try something else! Think outside the box!" Ash advised Theo.

"Okay, okay! let's see..." Theo began to ponder, his face turning a little red over the pressure he was feeling. "Oh, I have it! Eshouten, Quick Attack!"

"Es, shou!" Eshouten cried before barreling towards Frosulo, leaving a fading trail of white light behind.

"Frosulo, use Powder Snow again!" Ash ordered.

"Protect yourself with Steel Wing!" Theo quickly replied.

As Frosulo blew yet another frigid, snowy wing, Eshouten's wings glowed with a silvery sheen, and put it in front of itself as a makeshift shield that not only successfully blocked the Ice-type attack, but it added the power of Steel Wing to the Quick Attack, smacking the Ice Crystal Pokemon backwards.

"Frooooooo!" Frosulo cried, as he was sent rolling back.

"Frosulo!" Ash cried.

"Yes! Direct hit!" Theo cheered, pumping his fist. "Time to press the advantage! Air Cutter!"

Taking advantage of Frosulo's plight, Eshouten gained a little altitude, and fired yet another pair of blades of compressed air.

"Frosulo, use Shadow Claw to stand yourself upright!" Ash quickly commanded. "And then use Protect!"

A shadowy, clawed arm emerged from within the ice chrysalis, grasping the grassy ground, stopping Frosulo's rolling and using the sudden motion twist to lift himself up. As the ghostly arm disappeared, Frosulo's eyes glowed green, and a dome of green light appeared in front of the Ice Crystal Pokemon, just in time to block Eshouten's attack.

"Whoa! I never would have thought of using Shadow Claw like that!" Theo said, once again shocked by the audacity of Ash's tactics.

"I would never have thought of doing that either when I was starting out, but like me, you'll learn with enough time and experience," Ash said. "Signal Beam!"

"Dodge it!" Theo shouted. "Fly around him!"

Frosulo fired a multicolored energy beam from his eyes, but Eshouten was able to avoid it by flying circles around the Ice Crystal Pokemon. His lack of mobility greatly hindered his ability to track his foe down.

"Well done! Now catch him with Confusion!" Theo ordered.

Eshouten's eyes glimmered with a pink shine, and Frosulo was enveloped by an aura of the same color as he was lifted off of the

ground. Ash, however, knew how to avoid a repeat of Aveden's defeat.

"Frosulo, anchor yourself to Eshouten with String Shot!" Ash ordered.

Frosulo turned his head towards Eshouten, and fired a sticky thread of web at the Observer Pokemon, who was unable to move as it cast the Psychic-type move, wrapping its body in the sticky substance, pinning its wings against its body.

"SHOOOOO! SHOOOOO!" Eshouten yelled as it wildly trashed around, trying to force its wings through the sticky thread.

"Frosulo, use Shadow Claw to anchor yourself to the ground, and pull Eshouten to you!" Ash ordered.

"Eshouten, pull back!" Theo ordered.

As Frosulo generated yet another arm of pure darkness and dug its fingers into the ground, both Pokemon pulled with all their might. Eshouten was stronger, but thanks to Ash's trick with Shadow Claw, Frosulo had become immovable. The sticky thread tightened as the two Pokemon pulled in their direction.

"Keep going Eshouten! Soon the thread will snap!" Theo said.

"Frosulo, release the Shadow Claw and let Eshouten pull you!" Ash ordered.

"What!?"

The Ice Crystal Pokemon didn't hesitate for a moment and cancelled the Ghost-type attack, which in turn caused all the force Eshouten was pouring in its pull to launch Frosulo towards it like a rocket.

"Eshouten-"

But Theo was unable to issue an order before Frosulo painfully slammed into Eshouten, knocking the wind out of its sails.

"Frosulo, Powder Snow!" Ash ordered.

Frosulo took a deep breath, and blew a frigid wind at Eshouten point blank. At such a short distance, the Observer Pokemon's whole body was quickly covered in frost and snow, leaving it completely immobile.

"Eshouten... !" Theo cried.

Between the sticky thread still binding its body and all the ice over it, it was obvious that Eshouten wasn't able to fight anymore. A conclusion Theo reached and agreed, given that he sighed dejectedly as he returned his defeated Pokemon back to its pokeball.

"Guess this is it. Good job, Eshouten. We'll do better next time," Theo said, a little dejected.

"Well done Frosulo! You did an amazing job!" Ash said, patting the Ice Crystal Pokemon on the head.

"Fro!" Frosulo chirped, as he tackled Ash in an armless hug, smearing frost all over his body.

After putting the excitable Ice and Bug-type on the ground and wiping the ice bits from his clothes, Ash walked towards Theo.

"It was a great match, Theo. It goes on to show how much you have improved since our last encounter," Ash told him.

"Thanks," Theo said, looking a little bashful. He smiled confidently. "So, what do we do now?"

Ash looked at the sun, who was high in the sky. "It will be lunchtime soon. How about if we have a light training with your other Pokemon before that? And after that, we can talk about it then."

"Sounds great to me!"

...

Given that the group had time until Serena's next contest, they decided to spend the rest of the day as well as the next morning there for the sake of helping Theo. While Serena trained either on her own or with Clemont, Ash helped Theo prepare his rematch against Sheldon, by having his Pokemon train with Theo's, or with more sparring matches.

By the next day's noon, right after lunchtime, Theo decided it was his time to return to Vinoville and claim that badge from Sheldon.

"Thanks a lot for all the help, Ash. Now I feel like Sheldon has no chance to beat me!" Theo proudly boasts.

"I'm sure you'll do fine, Theo," Ash said. "And I hope we can battle again in the future!"

"We will! And when we do, I'll be even stronger than I'm now!" Theo said, as he began walking northwards. "Anyway, goodbye, and good luck in your contest, Serena!"

"Thank you! Good luck in your Gym match!" Serena said, as she and the rest of the group waved Theo goodbye.

"Alright, time to continue our journey. If we set a good pace, we'll be able to reach Legen Town with a full day to spare for Serena's contest!" Ash declared.

They all nodded, and continued heading south. All of them hoped that, by the time the contest was over, Serena would already have her final ribbon in her hand.

Author's Note: So yeah, after the intensity of Ash battling his fourth Gym Leader, a more calm, character driven chapter was

needed.

... what? Did you guys expect something more exciting and plot-critical to happen after Sheldon's Gym Battle? ;P

And thus, Theo makes his return! Last time we see him was on Bealbeach City, but he didn't do much before leaving. Here, however, has a much better chance at taking the spotlight. He's still a little brat with a bit of an ego, but both his experiences while traveling, Ash's mentoring, and more importantly, the fact that he might lose his father, forced him to mature a little. The poor kid's not having a good time, though thankfully for him he has Ash to lend him some comfort, as well as help him for his rematch against Sheldon.

On another subplot, Serena keeps trying but failing in making Sylveon overcome her phobia of Nuclear-types. But hey, if there's something Serena has learned from Ash is to never give up.

Also, if you feel like asking me about Ash leaving the series (because I know some of you plan to), don't. To me Ash has been dead since 2017, with SM and JN Ash being some creature wearing his skin, so I don't feel anything over him being retired.

Thanks a lot to Jake, Diatomic Rex, MegaSalamence64, Fox McCloud, BrightNova169, hirowriter and Viroro-kun for reviewing the last chapter, as well as special thanks to Viroro-kun for beta-reading this chapter and making it so much better with his edits and suggestions.

Next time, our heroes arrive at Legen Town, where Serena will try to win her fifth and final ribbon. In the meantime, don't forget to drop a review, alright? See ya!

Battle for a Smile

Chapter 37:

Battle for a Smile

Legen Town

The group managed to arrive at their next stop in their journey, Legen Town, at noon, with a whole day to spare before Serena's next contest.

As usual, a sign welcomed the newcomers to the town:

Welcome to Legen Town

The Birthplace of Heroes

"Birthplace of Heroes, huh?" Clemont asked, looking at the sign.

"I guess they called it that way because this is where you go to where the Tandor League takes place," Serena said, reading from her tablet, before raising her eyes and pointing to a large mountain to the south. "At the top of Mount Actanite."

"So that's where the league will take place? Great!" Ash cheered, as he and the others walked in.

Legen Town was rather odd compared to the other towns and cities of the region so far: it was divided into three levels, each one build on top of the other, like a very wide and flat pyramid, with each level surrounded by a wall of white stone, each level connected by flight of stairs made of the same stone as the walls. While the ground was paved with stone and concrete, there were also many green areas and trees planted on them.

As they entered, they noticed the lack of buildings, only some here and there, such as the Pokemon Center or the Contest Hall. It took them a while to notice that most houses were built into the walls, giving the place a rather quaint but unique look.

"This place looks so beautiful! It's nothing like any other town or city we've ever been to!" Serena said, admiring the town's unique layout and décor. "Say Ash, how about if we take a look around town together?"

"Sure thing! There's still some time until lunchtime," Ash agreed. "Though, now that I think about it, we haven't eaten together since the cruise, right? Maybe we can do that if you like to."

"I'd love to!" Serena excitedly replied. She then turned at Clemont and Bonnie. "I hope you guys don't mind..."

Clemont, however, shook his head and smiled. "Not in the slightest."

"Go and have fun on your date!" Bonnie said, smiling widely at them.

"Then it's settled! Let's go to the Pokemon Center first, then we'll have our date," Ash said.

...

Sometime later, after dropping all their Pokemon at the Pokemon Center for a checkup, Ash and Serena went on their date. Walking hand in hand, the two teens admired the town as they crossed it, while trying to find a nice place to have lunch.

From time to time, Ash couldn't help but steal a glance at the top of Mount Actanite, which loomed in the horizon. The boy wasn't subtle in this, something Serena took no time to notice.

"Be patient, Ash. You'll be there eventually," she giggled.

"Hehe, sorry. Guess that being so close to the site of the League got me a little excited," Ash apologized, chuckling lightly.

"Pika..." Pikachu shook his head.

"Hey, don't apologize. Like I said before, that passion of yours is something I really like of you," Serena said.

"Still... Bonnie told me that when on a date, I shouldn't ignore you for the sake of things I only like," Ash told her. "And well, I think she has a point."

"Bonnie seems to have very little faith in you when it comes to dates, doesn't she?" Serena asked.

"Well... I can't blame her," Ash admitted.

"In that case, let me tell you that I had a great time at every single one of the few dates we had gone together, so you shouldn't worry too much," Serena said. "I wouldn't like you to stop being you, Ash."

"Great to hear that, hehe," Ash said. "So, speaking of which, do you know where the Grand Festival is going to be held? Given that you're close to winning your last ribbon, we should make preparations to go there."

"Now that you mention it..." Serena pulled her tablet from one of her pockets, and began to look through the web. "Here it is. The Tador Grand Festival is held annually in Venesi City's Contest Hall. That's on East Tador."

"Venesi City? That's the city where the contest judge lady with the black and white hair and funny accent has a Pokemon Gym, right?" Ash asked.

"Indeed," Serena confirmed, as her finger tapped the screen lightly. "Guess we can knock two Pidgy out with one stone once we get there."

Ash peeked on the tablet, and his eyes grew wide when he saw the pictures displaying on the current page.

"Whoa! Is that Venesi City?" Ash asked, sounding a little louder than usual.

"So it seems. Do you like it?" Serena asked, intrigued by Ash's reaction.

"That city's... really pretty. Especially with those little rivers crossing the streets and people going on boats..." Ash said, his voice still holding awe.

"They're called 'canals', Ash, and the boats are called 'gondolas'," Serena gently corrected. She smiled and blushed a little upon seeing a picture of a couple on a gondola crossing a river, which was being manned by a Floatzel. "Heh, I'd love to try one once we get there."

"Sure, they look like a lot of fun," Ash agreed. "So, anyway, I think we should-"

Then, without any warning, Serena grabbed Ash by the wrist and pulled him around a nearby corner and pushed him against a wall, much to the boy's confusion and slight worry.

"Serena-?"

"Shhhhhh!" the honey blonde urged, placing a finger on her lips. She was looking at something on the street they just left.

Ash discreetly peeked from the corner, and took no time to see what got Serena so distressed: a raven haired girl her age wearing a red and black ninja costume.

"That's Sayaka..." Ash said.

"Of course she would be here," Serena grumbled, as she glared at the kunoichi, who was checking a clothing store. "She still has one ribbon to win, and this is the closest town to Vinoville that's going to host a contest. Just my luck."

"Why are we hiding from her?" Ash asked, Serena's arms still pinning him. The honey blonde sighed in relief as her rival continued walking and disappeared behind a corner, and released Ash. "Are you really that afraid of her?"

"Not afraid. Just... I just really don't want to deal with her right now," Serena stated. "Especially not after how her last two contests ended."

"It seems she's gone. Shall we check now for a place to eat?" Ash suggested.

"Sure, let's."

They chose a small café with a terrace. Given that the weather was so good, they chose to eat outside and enjoy the bright sunlight and warm weather.

Though Ash and Serena still had a great time on their date, Serena's mood didn't quite become as bright as it had been the moment they entered the town.

...

Sometime later, once they were done with their date, Ash and Serena returned to the Pokemon Center, where Clemont and Bonnie were waiting for them. The checkup had finished, so Bonnie was grooming some of Serena's Pokemon, in preparation for tomorrow's contests,, while Clemont was doing some training with his Pokemon at the Center's battleground, as well as to make sure nobody else would take it by the time Serena returned, something the Kalosian teen girl appreciated.

And thus, Serena spent the rest of the day training hard with her Pokemon, with Ash back as her sparring partner. Serena had asked Ash to take the kid gloves off, and requested him to face her with his two strongest Pokemon right now, Greninja and Metalynx. Ash

agreed even if he stated that he wouldn't use Mega Evolution and Battle Bond, something Serena was okay with.

"Braixen, Fire Blast!" Serena shouted.

"Brai, brai!" Braixen aimed her ignited wand at her two opponents, releasing a powerful mass of flames shaped like the kanji of fire.

"Greninja, stop it with Water Shuriken!" Ash countered. "And Metalynx, Energy Ball, rapid fire!"

"Ninja!"

"Lynx!"

As Greninja jumped into the air and pelted the Fire Blast with a barrage of watery shuriken, shrinking it until it disappeared into a cloud of smoke, Metalynx opened her mouth and fired a barrage of glowing emerald orbs.

"Selkid, stop them with Hyper Voice!" Serena commanded. "As loud as you can!"

"Seeeeeeeel-KIIIIIIID!" Selkid let out a powerful sonic scream that made the Energy Balls burst like bubbles, producing some rather visually pretty shower of green sparkles.

Both Greninja and Metalynx jumped back in order to avoid the attack's range, while Braixen stood protectively next to Selkid, wand raised ready to attack again. All four Pokemon were panting and sweating a little.

"Very well, Serena! Your Pokemon have become much stronger since they began to train for contests," Ash praised her.

"Thanks! They're really great, aren't they?" Serena replied, looking at them with pride. "They may not be able to beat yours, but to keep up with them, it speaks volumes of how much they have improved!"

"Though... we've been going at it for quite some time," Ash began. "How about we call it a day? Otherwise your Pokemon may be too exhausted for tomorrow."

"I guess you're right. Good job, guys! Let's take a good rest today so tomorrow we can put on a great show and win our final ribbon!" Serena told her Pokemon.

"Sel, sel!" Selkid cheered.

"Brai," Braixen nodded.

"And we'll finally make that arrogant ninja eat all her hurtful words!" Serena added, her eyes lit with an inner fire.

"I thought you already did that when you beat her in Vinoville?" Bonnie asked.

Serena, however, shook her head. "That was a tag team battle. Knowing her, she'll claim that that victory didn't count because her partner dragged her down or something like that."

"That's nonsense. It was a victory as valid as any other," Clemont replied.

"I know, but... I kinda agree with her, in a way," Serena said. She gently grabbed the blue ribbon on her shirt. "So far, I have never been able to defeat Sayaka on my own. And if I want to win the Grand Festival, I feel like that's a wall I need to climb sooner or later. My Pokemon and I need to be at our best in this contest. There's more than a ribbon at a stake here."

"I see. Still, with how much you've been training and how much you and your Pokemon have improved, I have no doubts that you'll beat her this time around!" Ash confidently proclaimed.

Serena smiled at the raven haired boy's unwavering faith in her. "Thank you. Though, one last thing, do you mind if I borrow the PST

tomorrow?"

"The PST? What for?" Ash asked, though clearly out of curiosity.

"I think I could use it to make more accurate plans with my Pokemon," she replied.

"Very well. Take it tomorrow with you if you want," Ash agreed.

...

The day of the contest finally arrived. The group got up early and headed to the Contest Hall. As usual. Ash, Clemont and Bonnie joined the queue to buy tickets while Serena got in through one of the backdoors, where she was led to the dressing room. Once she was there, she quickly moved to the waiting area.

And much to her displeasure, Sayaka was already there. The Tsukinami Village native noticed Serena, but all she did was sneer at her.

Good. Serena wasn't going to let the ninja get inside her mind like she allowed other times, but it would be much better if Sayaka didn't try anything to begin with.

...

Sometime later, Ash, Clemont and Bonnie were on their seats, waiting for the contest to begin. This time around, they managed to get a spot in one of the front rows. Perfect to see their friend win her final ribbon.

Soon, the lights dimmed, and the spotlight fell onto an orange haired woman who walked into the stage with a confident stride.

"Ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to the Legen Town Pokemon Contest! I'm your host, Jillian Meridian," she began, and as usual the crowd exploded into loud cheers. "Thank you! Also give a warm welcome to the judges that will evaluate our wonderful coordinators:

Legen Town's own Nurse Joy, the Venesi City Gym Leader Rosalind, and the S-Class connoisseur Ambrose Reigns!"

Jillian then went to explain the rules of the Pokemon Contests for those in the public not aware of them, even if at this point in the season most people already knew what a contest was about, and then showed the ribbon the contest winner would take with him or her, finishing off with introducing the very first contestant, beginning the Appeal Round.

Thankfully, Ash and the Lumiose siblings didn't have to wait much to see Serena in action this time around.

"And our next coordinator is Serena from Vaniville Town in Kalos!" Jillian announced.

Serena entered the stage, waving at the public who applauded at her.

"Yes! Go Serena! Show them what you can do!" Ash cheered, pumping his fist.

"You've got this!" Bonnie added.

Two pokeballs were already in her hand, and tossed them forward. "Pancham, Quetzoral, go!"

The capture devices opened, one releasing a flurry of golden stars, the other a tornado of green leaves and red flower petals, from which Pancham and Quetzoral emerged, respectively.

"Cham!"

"Que!"

"Let's begin! Quetzoral, fly around Pancham and use Energy Ball against him!" Serena commanded. "Pancham, grab them with Thunder Punch!"

"Tzoooo!" Quetzoral cawed, as she fired an Energy Ball at Pancham.

"Cham, pan!" Pancham cried, as he coated both paws with electricity, using them to grab the Energy Ball. The emerald orb quickly absorbed the yellow sparks Pancham's paws were producing, increasing in size and taking on a more yellowish tone, while sparks crackled around it.

"Great! Now Pancham, toss the ball into the air! And Quetzoral, burst it with Drill Peck!" Serena ordered.

"Pan-CHAM!" Pancham cried, before heaving the electricity-imbued Energy Ball into the air.

Meanwhile, Quetzoral dove downwards at the yellow and green orb, her beak covered by a white glowing aura double its size, which spun like a drill. The moment the drilling peck smashed against the combination attack, it exploded in a shower of green and yellow sparkles, wowing the audience.

"You're doing great, guys! Now Quetzoral, use your tail to launch Pancham into the air!" Serena commanded.

Quetzoral swooped in towards Pancham, letting the Playful Pokemon grab her tail, before sending him flying with a powerful swipe.

"Pancham, fire a Dark Pulse from above! And Quetzoral, Drill Peck again!" Serena ordered.

Pancham thrust his paws downwards, firing a stream of purple and black energy at Quetzoral, whose beak was covered in the drilling aura again. When the two attacks met, the Dark Pulse was split into multiple smaller threads of blackness, which caused the yellow and green sparkles still in the air to glow even brighter.

As Pancham began to fall, Quetzoral expertly picked him mid air without Serena having to tell her, before gently placing him on the

ground.

"And done!" Serena said, smiling widely. The public, delighted, rewarded her with a loud applause.

"A great performance by one of our regulars! Let's see if our judges agree!" Jillian said, motioning to the judge panel.

"A performance that was equal parts spectacle and excellent teamwork," Nurse Joy said.

"A magnifico display! Mixing lights with acrobatics, it was sublime!" Rosalind excitedly said.

"Tell me Serena, have you seen a performance so amazing, it leaves you stunned in place for hours? A performance so incredible, anything else coming after it is pointless? A performance that's simply impossible to top?" Ambrose began.

Some people in the audience gasped at Ambrose's seemingly out of nowhere praise. Was Serena's performance that good?

"Let me guess, you're about to tell me that my performance was the complete opposite of that, right?" Serena deadpanned, while crossing her arms.

Ambrose opened his mouth, but didn't say anything, staying there as if somebody had slapped him. "Just for that, I'm going to deduct five more points from your score."

Serena didn't say anything. She merely rolled her eyes, recalled her Pokemon, and left.

"Err... that was Serena, ladies and gentlemen!" Jillian said, hoping to rerail the contest. "Now, let's give a warm welcome to our next coordinator... !"

...

Serena returned to the waiting area just as the next coordinator walked into the stage. Ambrose's harshness may have worried her in the past, but Serena was sure her performance was good enough to pass to the Contest Battle round. Deciding not to mull about it any longer, she sat on one of the empty benches.

She watched her fellow coordinators come and go, seeing their performances through one of the waiting area's screens, though she didn't pay them that much attention.

"Great work out there."

Serena was startled upon seeing Sayaka sitting next to her. When had she done that? How is it that Serena didn't notice her until now?

"I always love when somebody denies that idiot the satisfaction of humiliating somebody," the raven haired girl continued talking, just as the screens displayed Ambrose verbally tearing the latest performance apart. "I hope that doesn't cost you advancing to the next round. After all, I want the pleasure of kicking you out of this contest myself."

"How did you...?" Serena sputtered.

"How was I able to sit next to you without you being none the wiser?" She asked. "I'm a ninja, remember? Moving without being seen or heard is child's play for me."

Serena just rolled her eyes. "So, now you're trying to intimidate me or something?"

"I don't need to. I know you already fear me," Sayaka confidently said, as she crossed her legs. "You wouldn't have hidden from me when you saw me yesterday in the street. Even if I was alone and you were with your boyfriend. What, don't you trust your big and strong man to protect you from little old me?"

"You saw me?" Serena asked, taken aback. She would have sworn that Sayaka hadn't noticed her. "I-I wasn't afraid of you! I just didn't want you to ruin my date with Ash! A-And I don't need Ash to deal with you!"

"Of course. Spending time with your boyfriend instead of training for the contest," this time, it was Sayaka who rolled her eyes. "No wonder you're unable to keep up with me."

"I did train a lot yesterday and- wait, why am I even justifying myself to you?" Serena asked, as she angrily got up from the bench. "I have nothing to talk with you about!"

And she stomped to the other side of the room.

"You cannot escape from me, Kalosian peasant," Sayaka said matter-of-factly. "Just like how you can't escape from your inherent inferiority."

That made Serena stop on her tracks. Grinding her teeth and clenching her fists, Serena turned around and walked back towards her rival. "Okay, just what's wrong with you!? What have I ever done to you? Why are you so fixated on me? Because your attitude goes beyond normal rivalry. What do you see in me that makes you hate me so much?" Serena shouted, drawing the attention of several other coordinators.

Sayaka appeared surprised by Serena's outburst. She was about to open her mouth to answer, but then the screen on the waiting area displayed Sayaka's name and picture, notifying her as the next one in the Appeal Round.

"Lovely chat. Let's do it again sometime. Now, if you excuse me..." Sayaka said, before getting up and walking into the stage, just as the previous coordinator returned.

Serena sat again on the bench, and watched Sayaka's performance: she had her Glaceon blow a massive chunk of ice with Blizzard, and

then, alongside a Baaschaf, used it as a base to sculpt an impressive ice castle, before giving the final touch with Hail.

She had to admit it was a pretty good performance (even if Ambrose found nothing good to say about it).

"She's right, I was hiding from her. I'm *afraid* of her," Serena admitted, looking down as she grasped the hems of her dress. "How I'm supposed to beat her if I let her intimidate me?"

That moment, both Braixen and Selkid emerged from their pokeballs, much to the honey blonde's shock.

"Braixen? Selkid?" Serena asked, looking at the two Pokemon. "Do you... do you want something?"

Wordlessly, Braixen walked towards Serena's backpack, opened it, and began to rummage inside it until she fished something: the Pokemon Speech Translator.

"Braixen...?" Serena asked, taking the device the moment her starter handed it to her. She turned it on and aimed the microphone at the Fire-type.

"Brai, xen, brai, braixen," she began. [Don't be afraid of her, Serena. Otherwise, you'll lose sight of what truly matters..]

"Losing sight of what truly matters...?" Serena repeated, while trying to figure out what the Fox Pokemon was talking about.

"Brai, braixen, brai, bra," Braixen continued. [Sayaka wants to use fear to beat her opponents. But we have something much stronger than fear. Remember why you are doing this.]

"Why am I doing this..." Serena repeated again. Then, as if by magic, the words she was looking for echoed inside her mind. "I'm doing this... so I can help others. So I can uplift them. So I can make people smile."

"Brai, braixen!" Braixen happily nodded. [Exactly! That's how you will defeat Sayaka. Show her that your kindness and your smile is more powerful than her arrogance and rudeness.]

"Sel, selkid! Kid, selkid!" Selkid added. [We're with you, Serena! We'll do our best to show the world what a great trainer you are!]

Serena's inner fire shifted. It no longer burned with the desire to beat Sayaka for the sake of rubbing victory in her face, but now it burned with the pleasant warmth she felt when she thought about her dream and goal.

"You're right. I can't believe I almost lost my way like that," Serena said, before pulling Braixen and Selkid into a hug with each of her arms. "Thank you guys. Let's show Sayaka, and everybody who watches us, the power of our smiles!"

"Braix!"

"Sel!"

...

About half an hour later, the Appeal Round came to an end, and both the audience and coordinators alike were waiting expectantly to see which ones would pass to the Contest Battle round.

"We had great performances today. Unfortunately, only the best eight contestants can go onto the next phase, the Contest Battle!" Jillian said with her usual gusto. "Now if you turn your attention to the monitors, you will see which coordinators earned the highest score!"

One by one, the eight finalists' pictures appeared on the screen, Sayaka came out first, while Serena was seventh.

"Good, Serena passes." Ash said, sighing in relief, and leaning back on his seat. "I was afraid that Ambrose jerk would kick her out for daring to speak against him."

"Still, this has to be the lowest Serena has scored on an Appeal Round, so I think that his threat wasn't just a bluff," Clemont noticed, his eyes looking at the rude judge.

"Maybe Serena impressed the other judges enough to give her a ton of points, huh?" Bonnie asked.

"Nene!" Dedenne agreed.

"It doesn't matter anymore. Serena passed, and that's the important part," Ash said.

Next, the screen displayed the matches lineup, Serena fighting the second match and Sayaka fighting the third, meaning that they'd only meet in the finals.

Jillian explained that this time, coordinators would have to use the same two Pokemon for all their matches.

Serena chose Braixen and Selkid for the Contest Battle round, the two of them having proved to work very well together, given that Braixen's caring nature made Selkid easy to trust her as her sister in combat. Her opponent, a purple haired boy, used a Flager, and a Pokemon Ash had never seen before: it was a small, bipedal, beige-colored dinosaur with an elongated head, wearing a purple leotard and pink headphones.

" Paraudio, the Audio Pokemon. Normal/Psychic. It is highly sensitive to sound and can perfectly replicate any sound it hears, even human speech. It loves to hear fast, rhythmic music," the Pokedex explained after scanning the new Pokemon.

Paraudio turned out to be quite the obstacle for Serena, as its Soundproof ability made it immune to Selkid's Sing and Hyper Voice. Still, she managed to snatch a victory when the five minutes passed by and she had a few more points than her opponent.

Sayaka's first battle was against an orange haired girl that used a Corsoreef and Ludicolo, while the ninja chose Voltasu and a shrimp-like Pokemon that resembled the Shrimputy she had used for the Appeal Round on the Vinoville Town Contest. Perhaps an evolution?

" Krilvolver, the Sharpshooter Pokemon. Water/Fire. Called "The Ranger of the Sea", its reaction times are nigh-instantaneous and its aim with its pistol is excellent due to its highly advanced eyesight," the Pokedex droned, confirming Ash's guess.

Sayaka's Krilvolver lived up to its impressive Pokedex description, dishing out impressive Flamethrowers and Octozookas, while Voltasu fried the two Water-type opposing Pokemon with powerful Discharges, quickly earning Sayaka a victory by knockout.

In the semifinals, Serena beat a boy who wore a costume with lots of white and blue feathers who employed an Aveden and an Eshouten, while Sayaka's opponent faced her with a Terlard and a Drilgann, but faced the same fate as the ninja's previous opponent.

And thus, Serena and Sayaka would meet in the finals for the first time since Kevlar Town's contest, the very first contest Serena had taken part in.

A reprieve of ten minutes so the finalists could get ready was announced..

...

Back at the waiting area, Serena didn't have any hopes of enjoying the ten minute rest until the finals, much of which she had to spend with Sayaka. Something the ninja didn't take long to prove.

"Well, well, look at this. It's you and me alone again. Just like in Kevlar Town," Sayaka said, spreading her arms as if to emphasize the emptiness of the room. "And just like in Kevlar Town, I'll be the one walking out with a ribbon, while you'll fall before me."

Serena didn't deign to dignify that with an answer or retort.

"Though, I prefer it to be this way, since I don't want an audience for this," Sayaka said. Serena tensed upon hearing those words, as genuine fear slowly crept upon her. What was this girl planning to do that she didn't want any witnesses? "You asked me what I see in you that makes me dislike you so much, right? Well, the answer is simple: myself."

"You see yourself in me?" Serena asked, as her fear slowly faded into incredulity and even outrage. "Excuse me if I find that hard to believe."

"Of course, I wasn't talking about my current self. This might come as a surprise to you, but I used to be like you, you know? It was why I decided to become a coordinator in the first place," Sayaka began. She sounded chipper, but Serena could sense a bit of bitterness in her voice. "I'll never forget the sheer wonder I felt the first time I saw a contest on TV when I was little... and when my parents took me to one live, words simply can't describe what I felt that moment... seeing the coordinators with their Pokemon doing all sorts of amazing tricks and spectacular displays, and how the audience, myself included, was so awed by them... it made me say 'that, that's what I want to be when I grow up'," she explained.

Serena didn't know what to say. While it wasn't a perfect comparison, Serena had similar reasons to choose the path of the performer. Seeing how performers made people smile and helped lift their spirits... that was something that motivated Serena enough to weather all the hardships that were thrown at her.

"That was a great outlook to have. What happened?" Serena asked, feeling genuinely curious.

" *Reality* happened," Sayaka said, her tone cold and cutting. "I haven't told anybody about this, but this isn't my first time in the contest circuit. My debut was two years ago. Like the stupid girl I was, I went into the stage, thinking that I could win while having fun

and wow the audience with what my Pokemon could do. I was so wrong..."

Sayaka clenched her fist, as her legs trembled a little, as if reliving those memories caused her distress.

"No matter how hard I tried, it simply wasn't enough. You have no idea how much it took me just to pass the Appeal Round. And when I finally did, I got utterly trounced in the Contest Battle portion," Sayaka bitterly said. "I tried to convince myself that it was just a blunder, that I was just starting out, that I would eventually get the hang of it and soon victories would follow... but they didn't.

"But then I realized that I simply wasn't trying hard enough. I needed to train more. Put more thought into performance routines. Push my Pokemon to their limits. And most importantly, forget about childish dreams and accept reality: that the world of Pokemon Contests is an extremely harsh and competitive environment where only the best can thrive."

"That's not true! Your childhood dreams were perfectly compatible with being a Top Coordinator!" Serena protested. "Look at me! I made it to the Master Class Showcase finals in Kalos, and have four ribbons already!"

"So now you realize why I can't let you best me, right? Because if I do, it will be like negating all my hard work, all my experiences, all my pain," Sayaka began, her bitterness slowly turning into anger. "You represent everything I left behind. You're my past. That's why I can't let you win, because I would be letting my past win! So no, I'd rather release all my Pokemon than let somebody like you beat me with the power of 'kindness and smiles!'"

Serena gasped at the outburst, but there was something else that stuck out. "Wait... you hear when I was talking to my Pokemon? But you weren't there..."

That moment, the screen inside the waiting area announced that the final match was about to begin, and for the finalists to head into the stage.

"Only the last part, but yes. And yes, I was. Ninja, remember?" Sayaka mockingly reminded Serena, before her smirk turned into a mask of fury. "Hearing you make that sickening declaration pushed me into sharing that painful part of my past with you. But enough words. It's time for us to battle again. It's time for me to crush you again!"

And with that, Sayaka turned around and walked towards the stage at an angry pace. Before following her, she let out Braixen and Selkid.

"Braixen, Selkid," Serena said, placing a hand on each of their shoulders. "Did you hear all that, didn't you?" she asked. The two Pokemon nodded. "Then, you'll understand why winning this match is so important. Not just because of the ribbon but... this is why we're doing this. Sayaka, she... she lost her smile. Let's do our best, so she can smile once again."

"Sel!" Selkid said, nodding fervently.

"Braix!" Braixen agreed.

The honey blonde smiled. "I know I can count on you."

...

The ten minutes eventually ran out, and Serena and Sayaka walked towards the battleground, taking their spots at the opposite ends of it. The public cheered wildly, eager to see the final battle of the contest.

"Serena had never defeated Sayaka before in a one on one battle," Clemont stated, sounding somewhat worried. "Will she be able to overcome her this time around?"

"You know what they say, third time's the charm. I'm sure Serena will do great," Ash confidently said.

"Now, the moment you have been waiting for!" Jillian excitedly announced. "The Legen Town Contest final battle! On one side, we have Serena, from Vaniville Town in Kalos!"

The public cheered, with Ash, Clemont and Bonnie being the loudest. Pikachu and Dedenne cheered as well.

"And on the other side, from Tsukinami Village, Sayaka!" Jillian continued.

The public cheered once again, almost as loud as for Serena, much to Ash's surprise. Even if the ninja girl lacked Serena's charm and kindness, people still admired her talent and ruthless determination.

"Coordinators, send your Pokemon!" Jillian told them.

"Braixen, Selkid, go!"

"Voltasu, Krilvolver, heed my call!"

A torrent of flames and a wave of crystal blue water came from Serena's pokeballs, which condensed into the shape of her Pokemon of choice, while Sayaka's Pokemon emerged from beneath a thunderstorm and a barrage of yellow fireworks, respectively.

"The final Contest Battle begins now! Five minutes on the clock! Begin!"

~Serena (Braixen & Selkid) VS Sayaka (Voltasu & Krilvolver)~

Serena wasted no time to issue the first order. "Braixen and Selkid, combine your Flamethrower with Hyper Voice!"

"Braix!" Braixen cried, shooting a powerful stream of flames from the tip of her ignited wand at Sayaka's Pokemon.

"Seeeeeel-KIIIIIIID!" Selkid let out a powerful sonic scream, which combined with the Flamethrower to form an impressive attack of sound and flame.

Sayaka lost a few points.

"A desperate move so early in the battle? Heh," Sayaka snorted dismissively, as she opened a fan and covered her mouth with it. "Krivolver, Octazooka, Voltasu, empower it with Discharge."

Krivolver aimed its arm cannon at the combined attack made by Serena's Pokemon, before firing a large missile of water, while Voltasu sent a barrage of lightning bolts at it, covering it in electricity. Both attack combinations clashed in the middle, producing a visually stunning and loud explosion.

Serena's points dropped to match Sayaka's, much to the honey blonde's frustration.

"Our turn. Krivolver, Lock On on Selkid, Voltasu, fly above them and rain Dragon Rage upon them!" Sayaka ordered.

As Krivolver carefully aimed at Selkid, its eyes glowing red as a crosshair of the same color appeared on Selkid's chest, Voltasu took off as amethyst and purple flames billowed from its beak, before exhaling a cone of fire of the same color from above at Serena's Pokemon.

"Braixen, counter with Fire Blast! And Selkid, prepare for Krivolver's attack!" Serena ordered.

Braixen aimed her wand upwards, forming a massive wall of flames shaped like the kanji of fire that not only stopped the Dragon Rage on its tracks, it carried enough momentum to keep going upwards towards Voltasu, forcing the Three Legged Pokemon to fly back, before exploding in a shower of red and orange sparks.

"Good! Now Selkid, Sing!" Serena ordered.

"Krillvolder, Flash Cannon on Selkid!" Sayaka shouted.

As the inside of Krillvolder's arm cannon began to glow with a silvery light, Selkid began to sing. Ethereal musical notes began to float around the battleground, causing both Voltasu and Krillvolder to get sleepy. The Sharpshooter Pokemon was having a hard time keeping its gun straight at its target, while the light inside the barrel flickered.

"No! Fight it! Don't fall asleep!" Sayaka shouted at her Pokemon.
"Come on, you can do it!"

Sayaka's encouragement seemed to work, as Krillvolder was able to power through the sleepiness and fire the Flash Cannon at Selkid.

"Braixen, use Hidden Power as a shield to protect Selkid!" Serena ordered.

"Brai, brai!" Braixen said with a nod, as she stood in front of her junior protectively, waving her wand to summon several multicolored energy orbs that spun around them, forming an impromptu barrier. While the Lock On made sure the Flash Cannon would always home on Selkid, it didn't give it the ability to bypass such a barrier, and the attack crashed uselessly against the spinning orbs. Sayaka's points dropped.

"Now Braixen, launch the remaining orbs! And Selkid, freeze them with Ice Beam!" Serena ordered.

"Brai!"

"Kid!"

Braixen waved her wand once again, sending the remaining Hidden Power towards Krillvolder and Voltasu, while Selkid froze them with Ice Beam. The attack smashed against Sayaka's two Pokemon, shattering into tiny shards of ice that glittered under the spotlights, and while it didn't have much of an effect on Krillvolder, it caused no small amount of harm to Voltasu.

Sayaka's points dropped again. She had lost thirty percent of her points, while Serena had barely lost fifteen percent.

"A clever way to use a normally offensive move into a defensive one, then use it as offense anyway!" Jillian excitedly commented. "Serena has a pretty big lead in points. Will Sayaka be able to turn the battle around?"

"Watch me as I do exactly that," she seethed, glaring at the announcer as if it was her fault that the ninja was losing. "Voltasu, Rain Dance!"

"Voooo!" Voltasu cried, raising its head, as its whole body was surrounded by a blue aura. Soon, artificial clouds began to form above the stage, before the rain started to pour down.

Meanwhile, in the audience, Serena's friends tensed up. They saw that strategy not long before, during Serena's battle with Sayaka aboard the cruise.

"The Rain Dance again. Now Serena will have to deal with empowered Thunders and Hurricanes," Ash said, as he leaned forward.

"It's even worse this time around. Not only does the rain empower Krilvolver's Water-type moves, but it weakens Braixen's fire attacks," Clemont said.

"But... the rain also helps Selkid, right?" Bonnie asked.

"Yeah, but Selkid only knows one Water-type move, so it's not that she will gain that much advantage of the rain..." Clemont replied.

"Good, now let's begin," Sayaka said, hiding a wicked smirk behind her fan. "Krilvolver, Octazooka on Braixen!"

"Kri, volver!" Krilvolver cried, as it aimed its gun at Braixen.

A sphere of water formed at the tip of the cannon, noticeably larger than the previous one, before firing it like a missile at the Fox Pokemon.

"Selkid, stop that attack with Ice Beam!" Serena ordered. "Braixen, destroy it with Flamethrower!"

Selkid quickly nodded, and fired a freezing beam from her mouth, turning the watery missile into an icy one, while Braixen shot a stream of flames, visibly smaller than before, at the frozen projectile, destroying it.

"Voltasu, Thunder," Sayaka said while checking her nails.

"Ta, tasu!" Volatsu cried, its body crackling with electricity, as it sent a bolt of lightning into the clouds above.

Said bolt fell down a second later onto the intermediate space between Braixen and Selkid, the ensuing explosion blasting the two Pokemon away in opposite directions.

Serena's points pummeled below Sayaka's score's level.

"And what an amazing comeback, folks! That Thunder made an even bigger number on Serena's points than it did on her Pokemon!" Jillian commented.

"Braixen, Selkid, quickly get back together!" Serena urged their Pokemon, who got to their feet and ran towards each other.

"Together or separated, it won't make a difference. Krilvolver, Lock On on Selkid! Voltasu, Hurricane!" Sayaka ordered.

Krilvolver aimed at Selkid, its eyes glowing red as yet another crosshair appeared on the Sea Nymph Pokemon's body, while Voltasu began to furiously beat its wings, sending powerful gusts of wind into the clouds above. However, Serena knew what was coming, and was prepared.

"Selkid, fire an Ice Beam above you!" Serena ordered.

As the tornado fell upon the two Pokemon, Selkid fired another freezing ray from her mouth, flying through the eye of the forming hurricane. And much to everybody's awe (and Sayaka's frustration), the nascent attack disappeared before it could fully form.

Sayaka's points dropped, but so did Serena's, with the ninja still in the lead, with only forty percent of her points lost while Serena had lost more than half of it.

"Hey, how is Serena losing points too? She stopped Sayaka's attack!" Bonnie protested.

"She used Ice Beam two times in a row. Spamming the same move is something penalized in contests," Ash explained, before he was assaulted by a doubt of his own. "Wait... how did Serena stop that Hurricane with Ice Beam?" Ash asked, scratching his temple.

"Tornadoes form under special weather conditions involving different air temperatures," Clemont began to explain, looking a little excited. "By using Ice Beam, she froze the air above it, upsetting said conditions and dispelling it."

"Whoa! How did Serena know to do that?" Ash asked in amazement.

"My guess is that she knew that Sayaka would try such attacks again, so maybe she studied ways to counter her strategies," Clemont explained, and nodded in approval. "Serena has shown everybody the power of science!"

"Science is so amazing!" Ash agreed.

"You won't be able to avoid this one!" Sayaka said, thrusting her open fan forwards. "Krillvolder, Flash Cannon! Voltasu, channel Thunder into it!"

Krilvolder trained its gun forward, the inside of the barrel glowing with a silvery light, before firing an energy missile of the same color, while Voltasu called forth a lightning bolt from above. The lightning merged with the silvery projectile, coating it in an electric yellow aura as sparks crackled around it.

Serena gulped loudly upon seeing such a menacing combo, but she wasn't going to back off. "Braixen, Fire Blast! Selkid, Hyper Voice!"

Selkid let out a sonic scream, while Braixen cast a massive wall of fire from her wand. The two attacks combined into a fire coated destructive soundwave, which barreled towards the incoming Steel/Electric combo. Unfortunately for Serena, perhaps because of the rain weakening Braixen's fire attacks, Sayaka's combination being that strong, or both, the Thunder-enhanced Flash Cannon plowed through the Hyper Voice and Fire Blast combo like a knife cutting through soft butter, before reaching Serena's Pokemon, resulting in a huge explosion upon impact.

"Braixen! Selkid!" Serena cried in horror, as her points dropped below twenty percent.

When the smoke dispelled, Serena could see that, even if Braixen and Selkid weren't out of commission yet, they would the next time Sayaka hit them with another attack like that. Pelted by the incessant raindrops, the Fox and Sea Nymph Pokemon tried to ignore the pain and got back on their feet.

"Honestly, how you were able to win four ribbons is beyond me," Sayaka began, looking at Serena in disgust. "But this is what happens when somebody who doesn't take Pokemon Contests seriously fights against somebody who does! This isn't some playground game, but a competition! And that's why you'll always lose to me in a fair match! Always! So save yourself the humiliation and give up already!"

"Never! I won't give up until it's over!" Serena shouted back. "Unlike you, I'm not a quitter!"

"What did you call me!?" an outraged Sayaka asked, her fingers gripping her fan with more force than necessary.

"A quitter! And yes, you're one, since you gave up on your past dreams!" Serena called her out.

"I didn't! Being Top Coordinator is my dream! That's why I'm going to do everything in my power to achieve it!" Sayaka yelled back, her face becoming increasingly red.

"Yet you forgot the reason that made you pursue that dream to begin with! You only see contests as some competition to win, when there's so much more to it! I don't want a mere trophy, I want to be like the people who filled your younger self with awe, who inspired you to follow in their footsteps!" Serena passionately said. Braixen and Selkid looked less beaten up and ready to battle more, as if their trainer's speech was reinvigorating them. "You lost your smile, Sayaka, but mark my words: I will not rest until I can make you recover it!"

"BRAI!"

"Sel?"

There was a crackling sound, as Braixen's entire body shone with a potent bright bluish-white light, and began to grow and change. Selkid watched the process with her mouth agape.

"Whoa! Look at that! Braixen is evolving!" an excited Bonnie shouted, bouncing on her seat.

"Serena's speech might have motivated Braixen so much, it helped her break her limits in order to gain more power to help Serena win!" Clemont said, sharing his sister's excitement.

"Yeah! Serena has this in the bag!" Ash agreed.

Serena already knew what Braixen would evolve into, given that she had seen the Pokemon multiple times, and indeed, when the light went out, a Delphox stood in Braixen's place.

Sayaka's points dropped a little.

"Delphox!" the newly evolved Pokemon softly said.

"Sel... Selkid! Kid, sel!" Selkid excitedly said, stars twinkling in her eyes as she looked at her partner.

"Okay, so your Pokemon evolved. Big deal. You're still going to lose," Sayaka nonchalantly said. Not without reason, given that the ninja knew firsthand that a Pokemon evolving mid-battle didn't ensure victory.

Then, before Serena could issue an order, Delphox aimed her wand upwards, casting a huge Fire Blast into the air. The barrage of flames crashed against the rainclouds, dispelling them completely in one fell swoop.

"Amazing! Delphox's greater power allowed her to clear out the clouds! What a way to make a first impression!" Jillian gushed, as Sayaka's points dropped even further.

Serena looked at the scoreboard: she had a fifth of her points, while Sayaka had little less than half.

"Come on guys, we can still win this!" Serena roused.

"Selkid!"

"Phox!"

"Selkid, cover the ground in ice with Ice Beam! Delphox, Psybeam into it!" Serena ordered.

"Sel!"

"Delphox!"

Selkid fired an Ice Beam into the stage as Serena had said, covering the floor in a sheet of ice, making Krilvolder to fall back and Voltasu to hover over it. Delphox then fired a multicolored beam from her eyes into the thin, reflective surface, making the beam bounce and refract into dozens of smaller beams that smashed into Voltasu and Krilvolder, making the two Pokemon cry in pain.

Sayaka's points dropped below the forty percent mark.

"I won't lose to the likes of you! Krilvolder, melt that ice with Flamethrower, and Voltasu, Discharge!"

Krilvolder aimed its arm cannon at the frozen floor, and poured a torrent of flames over it, melting it, and turning it into a puddle that spread towards Delphox and Selkid's side.

"Delphox, help Krilvolder with a Flamethrower of your own!" Serena happily ordered.

"What?" Sayaka asked in shock.

Delphox nodded, and shot another stream of fire at it, evaporating the puddle into a cloud of steam just as Voltasu hit the now dry floor with Discharge, to no effect, causing her to lose even more points.

"Selkid, Ice Beam! Delphox, Hidden Power!" Serena ordered.

"Quickly, dodge them!" Sayaka desperately ordered.

However, given the ensuing cloud of steam blocking their vision, Sayaka's Pokemon couldn't see where the attacks came from, and soon Krilvolder was pelted by a barrage of multicolored energy orbs while a beam of chilling energy hit Voltasu squarely in its chest.

Sayaka's points were reduced to a quarter of her initial total. Almost there!

"And now, for the big finish, Delphox-"

BZZZZZZZZZZ!

The buzzer rang, snapping Serena out of her frenzy. Looking at the scoreboard, she realized that the timer had run out. And while Serena had removed a lot of Sayaka's points, the ninja's score was still superior to hers.

"And time's out!" Jillian declared after the buzzer rang. "The winner of the Legen Town Contest is Sayaka!"

"No..." she said in a whisper.

The scoreboard changed to show Sayaka's picture next to a smaller ones of her two Pokemon below it, with the word "WINNER!" written under it.

Sayaka let out a sigh of relief, as her mouth curved into the usual smug grin she often sported.

"Do you get it now, don't you? No matter what you do, you will never *beat* me," Sayaka said, as she walked past Serena.

As Sayaka headed to the podium, where the three judges were ready to award her with her final ribbon, Delphox and Selkid walked towards Serena, both looking apologetic.

"Del..."

"Kid..."

"Hey, don't worry, guys, it's okay," Serena said, pulling the two of them into a hug on each arm. "You did your best. We'll do better next time."

Her Pokemon didn't say anything. They just returned the hug back.

Then, after the hug broke, Serena turned around to see Sayaka accepting the ribbon, rising it above her head, and vowed that she would win the Tandor Grand Festival.

"Congratulations, Sayaka!" Nurse Joy said. "With this ribbon, your spot on the Grand Festival is secure! You're now much closer to make your dreams true!"

"Thank you. However, I must disagree with you," Sayaka said, before fixing Serena with a piercing glare. "Dreams have no place in reality."

However, despite her loss, there was no sadness on Serena's face, only resolve.

Serena had also made a vow, and she wouldn't rest until it was fulfilled.

Author's Note: And another contest down, even if Serena didn't win this time around (heh, that rhymes).

Yeah, many of you guessed that Serena would lose since it's a bit too soon for her to get all her ribbons, given that Ash isn't even close to get his fifth badge. I'm sorry if this chapter made it look as if Serena was finally going to beat Sayaka this time around, especially with Braixen finally evolving into Delphox, but yeah, it wasn't Serena's time just yet.

Speaking of Sayaka, I hope this chapter helped shed some light on her character with the reason as for why she acts the way she does. Some of you expressed discontent with her, so while I'm not asking you to like her, she should at least come off as a more interesting character. And if not, well, at least since she won her fifth ribbon (that makes two of Serena's rivals to do so) you can take solace in that you won't have to see her again until the Grand Festival.

Also, I originally planned for Braixen to evolve into Delphox much earlier, during the Burole Town contest. But given that said contest focused more on Selkid, having her evolve there felt wrong. That's why I made sure to give Braixen more focus here and reaffirm her role as Serena's main Pokemon and all how much she supports her trainer.

Thanks a lot to cricketlaxwolvesbandy, Jake, Fox McCloud, MegaSalamence64, 61394, hirowriter and Viroro-kun for reviewing the last chapter, as well as special thanks to Viroro-kun for betareading this chapter and making it so much better with his edits and suggestions.

Next chapter, our heroes plan their next move and resume their journey. Until then, keep those reviews flowing, since I love reading them :)

Fear and Growth

Author's Note: To assure guest reviewer MarcusDarkus87's fears, no, this story isn't dead, nor it will be, since I plan to see it to completion.

Chapter 38:

Fear and Growth

Legen Town

It was the morning after the Legen Town contest, and the group were having breakfast at the town's Pokemon Center. With the contest over and no Pokemon Gym for Ash to challenge, there was nothing left to do there, so they were ready to bid the town goodbye. Not that they were in a hurry to leave, though, as they had the whole day to resume their travel.

"Are you sure you want us to go to Amatree?" Ash asked Serena.
"I'm sure there are other towns that will hold contests soon."

The honey blonde shook her head. "No, I don't want to delay us any longer. I only have one more ribbon to win, while you still have to earn four badges."

"Serena, I think I already told you before that your contests aren't slowing us down..." Ash said.

"Piiika," Pikachu nodded in agreement.

"Look. Amatree will host a contest in a week and a half. With good pace, we can get there with at least three days to spare," Serena insisted, as she showed Ash and the siblings a map displayed on her tablet, with the route marked with a red blinking line. "In fact, Ash may be even able to challenge the Gym Leader before the contest

begins. Once Ash has his badge and I have all the ribbons, we can head to East Tendor."

"Not to be pessimist Serena, but what if you don't win the Amatrie contest then?" Clemont suggested. "You'll be skipping on a lot of contests that you won't be able to retake if you don't win that one."

"From what I'm seeing, East Tendor also has towns with Contest Halls, so should the worst come to pass, I'll keep trying there," Serena replied.

"I see you made up your mind," Ash said. "Alright then, once we're done here, let's pack our things, pick our Pokemon, and head towards Amatrie."

No one objected to that.

...

About an hour later, the group was ready to leave. With their Pokemon fully healed and everything stored inside their backpacks, the group of four walked through the town to the east, ready to continue their journey.

As they passed the Contest Hall, Serena couldn't help but let out a dejected sigh. The memory of her battle against Sayaka was still fresh in her mind. Even if her determination was still unshaken, her inability to defeat the raven haired ninja gnawed at her mind. Though it wasn't merely a matter of being skilled in a Pokemon battle, there was much more to it.

In her road to self-discovery during her journey through her home region, Serena had learned not only what she wanted to do with her life, but what she must do in order to achieve it. And she saw this new journey as an opportunity to take all that she had learned from her experiences, from Aria, from Palermo, and put it to practice.

Something she was already doing not only by merely learning even more and pushing her Pokemon's skill to new heights in order to dazzle the public, but also to help those in need, such as Vitor, despite the boy being her rival.

Sayaka considered Serena her own antithesis, but the ninja's words made the honey blonde realize that the opposite was also true. Sayaka was somebody who challenged Serena's views, who wanted to prove them wrong. Sayaka wasn't just an obstacle for Serena to beat in order to become Top Coordinator, like the rest of her rivals.

Serena needed to beat Sayaka in order to prove that her philosophy wasn't wrong.

Serena knew that Aria would be able to reach somebody like Sayaka and make her smile again. And thus, if she ever wanted to surpass her mentor, this was something Serena had to learn to do as well.

"Serena?" Ash asked, snapping her out of her thoughts. "You okay?"

"Huh? Oh, yes, sure! I'm fine!" Serena quickly replied. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, you seemed a bit distracted for a bit. And I noticed that we just passed the Contest Hall," Ash said, pointing at the building now behind them with his thumb. "Still thinking about yesterday?"

"A bit, yeah," Serena replied, rubbing her arm.

Ash, however, smiled. "It's okay. Don't worry, I'll make sure we'll train even more, so when the two of you face again, you-"

"Ash," Serena interrupted him. "I don't think I'm going to beat her by simply training more."

The boy shot the honey blonde a look as if she said the most stupid thing in the world, before frowning a little. "Come on Serena, don't tell me you're going to give up! You can't let-"

"It's not that," she interrupted him for the second time in a row. "It's that... um, well... ugh, this is a little hard to put into words."

Ash didn't say anything, and patiently waited for Serena to put her thoughts in order so she could voice what she was thinking.

"Ash, you traveled through many regions. So I assume that you had quite a few rivalries, right?" Serena asked.

"Yup!"

"Though, do any of those rivals... did you feel like any of them weren't just opponents to beat, but your opposites in a much deeper way?" Serena asked. Ash scrunched his face a little, trying to remember if there was any rival that fit such description. "Because, well... I think that's what Sayaka is to me. When we battle, it's not just our skill on the line, but also our convictions. And I believe I will only be able to beat her once my convictions are as strong as hers."

Then, Ash's face lit up, as if the memory he was looking for was finally unlocked. "Oh yeah, now I remember! Paul!"

"Paul?" Serena asked.

"A guy I battled many times during my journeys through Sinnoh," Ash began. "Our rivalry was pretty intense, and not because we were both aiming for the top with everything we had, but because we had very different approaches to do it."

"Huh? How so?" she asked.

"Well... when it came to Pokemon, Paul didn't believe that befriending them was necessary. He had very high expectations, and his training methods were really hardcore. If Paul caught a Pokemon that he felt had little potential, he would release it without hesitation. And even if a Pokemon had potential, if said Pokemon couldn't keep up with the training, Paul would release it too. In fact, that's how I got Infernape," he explained.

Serena remembered the red and white fire monkey at the ranch. While she never saw him in combat, he looked pretty strong. Also, Serena could easily imagine why Ash and this Paul character clashed, if Ash's description of him was truthful. While Ash had released Pokemon, having seen so herself with Goodra, it was always to the benefit of said Pokemon, and couldn't picture the raven haired boy releasing a Pokemon just because he felt it was weak or something like that.

"Paul used to be Infernape's trainer back when he was a Chimchar, but he was unable to meet Paul's standards, so he released him. Chimchar felt devastated so I offered him to travel with me and my Pokemon, which he accepted," Ash said, smiling at the memory. "I also wanted to take this as an opportunity to show Paul that he was wrong about Chimchar, and that every Pokemon has potential to be awesome."

"And did you beat him?" the honey blonde asked.

"At first, no. We fought many times, and he won almost all of them," Ash continued. "It wasn't until we faced each other during the Sinnoh League for the last time where I was able to finally defeat him. And not just that, but Infernape, the Pokemon he had discarded back then, defeated half of Paul's Pokemon, including his Electivire, his strongest battler."

"Wow..." Serena said. If there was somebody who could take a Pokemon from zero to champion, that was Ash. "Though, this Paul seemed to be quite shortsighted if he couldn't see how awesome Infernape was."

"You see, Infernape's ability is a special kind of Blaze that gives him an even bigger power boost than normal. However, it came at the cost of Infernape losing his mind and going berserk. Paul caught Chimchar because of such power, and put him through a very rough training in order to master it, but he was unable to, that's why Paul released him.

"I felt that Chimchar could be great even without that special Blaze, so I trained him like any other of my Pokemon, and let him grow at his own pace. It was that way that Chimchar, as Infernape, was able to fully master his special Blaze," Ash said, seemingly finishing his tale.

"And the next time you faced Paul, you beat him, right?" Serena asked, hopeful.

"Oh no. The next time we faced each other, he beat me so hard, it was almost comical," Ash said, sounding like somebody remembering a funny anecdote. "It wasn't until the next time, at the League, that I finally beat him."

Serena was growing frustrated. "Then how did you do it? How did you finally beat him after losing to him time and time again?" Serena asked, feeling that she was reaching the answer she so desperately craved.

"I kept training as hard as I could. I continued to believe in myself, and trust my Pokemon. And in the end, we won," Ash said.

Serena waited for Ash to continue, but when the boy did not, she realized that was all he had to say.

The honey blonde raised an eyebrow. "That... that's it? That's how you beat Paul? Just believing in yourself and training hard?"

"Is there anything more to it?" Ash asked. Judging by the tone, it was a genuine question.

"Well... maybe I thought that you reached some sort of realization that gave you an insight on how to defeat Paul," Serena explained.

"No, not really. That's all there is to it."

Serena sighed, a little disappointed, though he chided herself for feeling that way. This was Ash, she should have known that he

wasn't going to reveal some deep secret that would allow her to beat her bitter rival in an easy way.

"In that case, I think I'll take up your offer of more training," Serena finally said. "If I'm going to prove to Sayaka that my conviction isn't wrong, I'll better put my proverbial money where my mouth is."

"Well said!" Ash cheerfully agreed. "You'll see, next time, you're going to-"

Ash was interrupted by a bright flash of light, followed a second later by a booming noise coming from the north.

And that was followed by the earth shaking for a few seconds.

"What... what was that?" Bonnie asked, her voice a whisper, as Dedenee hid inside her bag.

"It came from Vinoville's direction..." Clemont said, as he and the others looked towards the north. Other people around them started to look in the same direction, and murmured in worry.

A plume of smoke could be seen in the horizon

"Wait... wasn't there a Nuclear Power Plant there...?" Serena fearfully asked.

"ATTENTION EVERYONE!" a shout came from the sky. Everybody looked up, and saw a Ranger flying on a Staraptor. They remembered her as Wendy, the same Ranger who had warned them about the Pokemon thieves back in the Baa Grasslands. She was holding a megaphone. "There has been a meltdown at the Nuclear Plant Zeta! This is NOT a drill, there has been a meltdown at the Nuclear Plant Zeta!"

"What? No!" A man said.

"Two meltdowns so close to each other?" A woman cried.

"What's going to be of us... !" An elderly man dejectedly said.

"No... not again!" Clemont moaned in horror.

"But... why? Why does this keep happening!?" a frustrated Ash asked.

"All civilians, head to the town's bunkers and stay there until it's deemed safe to come out!" Wendy said. "We normally don't do this, but if any trainer wishes to join the Ranger Corps and lend their help in this emergency, please go to the town's edge with the Nature Preserve, to the north!"

"We should go and help them," Ash suggested. "Bealbeach City was overrun by a horde of Nuclear-type Pokemon after the first power plant blew up, and the same thing could happen to Legen."

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu agreed.

"And yes, I already know you're going to tell me to stay in Legen," Bonnie stated before Clemont could say anything. While annoyed, she thankfully seemed to understand the why..

"It's good that you're being reasonable in such a time of crisis. Luxray, come out!" Clemont said, sending out his strongest Pokemon. Clemont then grabbed Bonnie and sat it over the Gleam Eyes Pokemon's back. "Luxray, there's been an emergency. Ash, Serena and I are going to help the Rangers deal with it. I want you to take Bonnie to the shelters and take care of her until we return. Can you do that?"

"Lux, luxray!" the feline energetically nodded, as if assuring Clemont that he had nothing to fear, before sprinting away with Bonnie on his back.

"Alright, let's go!"

...

A few minutes later, Ash, Serena and Clemont were at the edge of the Nature Preserve, alongside other trainers that also volunteered to help. In front of them was a group of Rangers, led by the woman with the Staraptor, Wendy. There were also multiple jeeps and vans painted with the green and black of the Tandor Ranger Union parked around them.

"Thank you for coming. The situation is dire, so I'll be as brief as possible," the light-green haired woman began. "About fifteen minutes ago, Nuclear Plant Zeta, north of Vinoville Town, suffered a reactor meltdown. The cause of this attack was a horde of Nuclear Pokemon, similar to the incident at Nuclear Plant Epsilon. Vinoville Town, as well as all its surrounding areas, are now completely irradiated. No human can live there, and every Pokemon there has been turned into a Nuclear Pokemon.

"Fortunately, this disaster isn't as bad as it could have been. We got an anonymous tip that this attack was coming, so our fellow Rangers were able to evacuate the town, as well as the people in the Wheatfields that lived close to the power plant, before the reactor blew up. We're told that, while people in the Wheatfields will be taken to Bealbeach via ship, people in Vinoville are being escorted towards Legen as we speak.

"However, we've been told that the Nuclear Horde isn't going to stay idle at Vinoville, but are actually giving chase to the people! So far, the Rangers and trainers escorting them, Gym Leader Sheldon included, are keeping the few Nuclear Pokemon harassing the group at bay. However, it will only be a matter of time until the thick of the horde reaches the group. We need to get to them before that happens. Now, I'm going to ask, does any of you have previous experience fighting Nuclear Pokemon?"

Only Ash, Serena and Clemont raised their hands, causing both the other volunteers and the Rangers to murmur among themselves.

"Well, that's better than nobody. Okay, for the rest of you, I'm not gonna lie, these Nuclear Pokemon are both extremely aggressive

and dangerous. If there's anybody having second thoughts about this, now's your chance to turn back."

No one turned back, though.

"Good to see that. Now everybody, get on a jeep or on a van! We'll go and meet the Vinoville residents at the Nature Preserve, and we'll lead them towards Legen! Go, go, go!" Wendy urged, before pointing at Ash, Serena and Clemont. "You three, with me!"

They didn't need to be told twice. All the volunteers quickly split into groups and boarded either a jeep or a van, with Ash, Serena and Clemont going with Wendy herself on her jeep.

A few minutes later, a convoy of jeeps and vans headed north as fast as their wheels could carry them, leaving a trail of dust behind.

...

"Oh, so you were those guys!" Wendy said in realization.

On their way to meet the group of refugees, Ash, Serena and Clemont took the chance to reacquaint themselves with Wendy, reminding them of their encounter with the Baa Grasslands. As the jeep rolled through the grassy slopes, Wendy's Staraptor soared above them.

"Though, I believe there was a little girl in your group as well," Wendy pointed out.

"Yes, my sister Bonnie," Clemont said. "But we decided to leave her back at Legen, so she can be safe there."

"Good call," Wendy said approvingly, while the car hit a small bump. "So, you said you had experience fighting Nuclear-type Pokemon? Were you at the Bealbeach disaster?"

"Yeah. Though Serena and I fought them earlier than that, when we accompanied Clemont to the power plant on the island there," Ash

explained.

"So, you were on the Power Plant Epsilon before it was attacked, then you were present at Bealbeach when the Nuclear horde invaded it, and now Power Plant Zeta blows up just after you guys left Vinoville..." Wendy recounted. "Did anybody tell you you guys are a magnet for trouble? Because you guys have to be the closest thing to an Absol in human form."

"Yeah, we've been told that quite a few times, hehe," Ash said, chuckling awkwardly.

Oh, if only this Ranger knew what Ash alone had lived through long before he ever set a foot on this region...

"Oh! I just remembered something from the Bealbeach City attack: turns out the Rangers' Stylers didn't work against Nuclear Pokemon, so you'll only have your partner Pokemon to battle them," Ash told Wendy.

"We know. We'll have to rely on our partner Pokemon in order to face them. It's not ideal, but we aren't going to stay idle while we let those monsters wreak havoc on our region," she said, gripping the steering wheel. "With or without Capture Stylers, we Rangers will keep this region safe no matter what!."

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu said, pointing a paw ahead.

Ash narrowed his eyes, and could see something coming from the opposite direction towards them.

"It looks like we managed to get them in time," Wendy said, letting out a sigh of relief. As the jeep approached, they could see it was a rather large group of people. Floating above them, there was a large amount of S51. Leading them was no other than Sheldon.

The jeep stopped a few meters in front of the group, as it did the rest of the convoy. Soon, all the volunteer trainers and the Rangers

stepped out of the vehicles, their hands already on their pokeballs and Capture Stylers, respectively, ready to battle despite the current lack of enemies.

"Oh thank goodness, reinforcements!" the bespectacled Gym Leader said, as he approached the Ranger Captain.

"Is this all the people in Vinoville?" Wendy asked.

"I think. I mean, it's not like I had the time to count them if there was somebody missing," Sheldon replied. "They need to be escorted to Legen ASAP! There's an horde of radioactive nasties on our heels, and none of these people can defend themselves!"

"Calm down. That's why we're here," Wendy stated. She then addressed the large group of townspeople. "Alright, those who are either elderly, have small kids, or have physical disabilities may go on the vehicles! The rest of us will have to continue on foot!" Wendy said, before turning back at her Rangers and the volunteers.

"Divisions A and B, as well as the volunteers, will stay with me and fend off the horde's advance! Divisions C and D, you'll escort the townspeople back to Legen! Alright, let's see where those bastards are now..." Wendy said, as she pulled out a pair of binoculars and scanned the area ahead of them.

"Hey, Ash!" a familiar voice said.

Ash and his friends saw a boy with red hair with a yellow streak in the middle walking towards them.

"Theo!" Ash said.

"Oh, of course! You said that you were going back to Vinoville to beat Sheldon!" Serena remembered. "Thank goodness you're okay!"

"Yeah. Thankfully the Rangers were able to alert the people and evacuated us in time," Theo said, as she looked in the direction of Vinoville. "Maybe it's not the best time to announce it, but I defeated

Sheldon at last. So thank you guys for lending me a hand back then..."

"Don't sweat it. Though, you might want to put those skills to good use and help us stop the horde of Nuclear Pokemon getting into Legen," Ash told him.

Theo's expression was that of resolve. "You can count on me and my Pokemon!"

That moment, they heard Wendy's radio crackle.

"Wendy, this is Elita, do you copy?" a female voice said.

"I hear you, Elita. What's going on?" Wendy replied.

"I've got some news, ma'am. Apparently, multiple of those Nuclear Pokemon have split from the main group and are attacking wild Pokemon indiscriminately," Elita told her. "If we don't do anything soon, this will be a massacre!"

"Oh shit, the wild Pokemon!" Wendy cursed, slapping a hand against her forehead. "I forgot that those monsters attack anything that's not one of them, either human or Pokemon. Alright people, we can't just wait for them to come to us! Let's form small teams and spread out! No one is allowed to go alone, you hear me!? Go, go, go!"

"Theo, better come with me," Ash suggested.

"That means I'll go with Clemont then," Serena said.

"Alright, if you guys have trouble, don't hesitate to give us a call!" Ash told his friends, his left wrist held to show his pokegear.

"That goes for you too, Ash," Serena reminded him.

"Don't worry, I won't give you guys any reason to worry," Ash reassured them. "Now let's go!"

And thus Ash and Theo headed towards a forested area to the east, while Serena and Clemont went to the west, where a river was flowing.

...

It didn't take long for Ash and Theo to encounter Nuclear Pokemon. The moment the two trainers were spotted, one of them let out a howl, as if to tell the rest of the horde that there were new victims ripe for tearing apart, making the nearby radioactive monsters home upon them, while letting out crazed growls and cries.

"WHOA! THERE'S SO MANY OF THEM!" Theo shouted, clearly freaked out. "What are we gonna do!?"

"We face them! Let's use all our Pokemon at once!" Ash said, throwing all six of his pokeballs in the air. "I choose all of you! To battle!"

The pokeballs opened mid air, releasing all six of Ash's current Pokemon, all of them taking battle stances as soon as they materialized. The Nuclear Pokemon weren't deterred upon the sight of the new arrivals, probably happy that they had more targets to maul.

Ash didn't even need to give an order for his Pokemon to engage the enemy. Greninja caught mid leap a Tancoon that jumped at him, before kicking it back with Aerial Ace; Raptorch let out a fiery Flamethrower, forcing back several Baashaun that were getting close; a pair of Gligar dived from above, their claws glowing with a sickly green aura -Ash recognized the move as Nuclear Slash, the same move Clemont's Geigeroach had-, but it was parried by Metalynx's Iron Tail; Aveden carried Frosulo between his talons, as the Ice Crystal Pokemon used Powder Snow to freeze a bunch of Nuclear Mareep and Baashaun.

"Come on Theo, my Pokemon will need your help!" Ash urged the redhead.

"R-Right! Get out, everyone! Time to fight!" Theo said, mimicking Ash and throwing all his pokeball into the air.

Just like before, Theo's Pokemon joined the fray as soon as they materialized. His own Metalynx joined Ash's, protecting its kind from a pair of furtive Nuclear Ekans with Leaf Blade; Folerog started to fire Bubble Beams constantly in every direction; Lunapup knocked out a Nuclear Baaschaf with a powerful Brick Break; Eshouten caught a pair of Nuclear Pahar with Confusion and slammed them against each other, knocking them out instantly, and Devimp pelted a nearby Nuclear Arbok with Shadow Ball.

With Ash and Theo's Pokemon working together, the group of Nuclear Pokemon was slowly pushed back.

"Yes! We're beating them back!" Theo cheered.

"Don't lower your guard! More will come to take the place of those we have defeated!" Ash warned the younger boy.

"Ugh, don't these guys know the meaning of surrender?" Theo complained.

"Apparently not," Ash said, shooting the Nuclear Pokemon in front of him with a steely glare. "But neither do we!"

"Pikapi!" Pikachu warned Ash.

"Look, over there!" Ash said, pointing in the direction Pikachu had warned.

Right there, they saw a couple of Owten being harassed by a pair of Nuclear Tancoon and a single Nuclear Tanscure.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of that! Folerog, Poison Jab! Eshouten, Air Cutter!" Theo quickly commanded.

Eshouten quickly hovered above the attacking Pokemon, sent a pair of blades of compressed air down with a beat of its wings. The

projectiles slammed against the Tancoon, pushing them backwards, while Folerog charged at the Tanscure, its front legs coated in a purple aura, before delivering a pair of powerful thrusts at the evolved Pokemon.

While those attacks alone weren't enough to knock the trio of canine Pokemon out, it gave the Owten the chance to run away.

"Well done, Theo! Keep going!" Ash praised the redhead. "But don't lower your guard!"

"No innocent Pokemon will suffer any harm as long as I'm here!" Theo proudly boasted, probably channeling some superhero he saw on TV.

"Theo, to your right, watch out!" Ash warned.

Theo turned to said direction, only to see a Nuclear Arbok slithering menacingly towards him. Once spotted, it abandoned all pretenses of stealth, and lunged at the redheaded boy with its jaws wide open, while all that Theo could do was stare at it like a Deerling in the headlights.

"SHAAABAK!"

"GRE!"

But before the Arbok could attack Theo, A Water Shuriken smashed against its face, drenching it in a watery explosion and pushing it backwards. This seemed to snap Theo out of his scare-induced stupor.

"Folerog, Muddy Water!" Theo ordered.

The Long Toad Pokemon landed between its trainers and the Nuclear serpent, before releasing a torrent of brown liquid from its mouth, washing the Arbok away.

"Theo!" Ash said, as he ran towards the boy, with Greninja behind him. "Are you okay?"

"Y-Yeah," Theo said, letting out a sigh of relief. "Thanks for the save there."

"That's why I told you not to lower your guard. These Nuclear Pokemon are both relentless and aggressive," Ash said.

"Don't worry. You won't have to save my butt again," Theo replied.

That moment, Pikachu's ears perked up. "Pi, pikapi!" Pikachu said, pointing north.

"Pikachu has heard more wild Pokemon being attacked by the Nuclear horde," Ash said.

"In that case, no time to waste! Let's save them!" Theo stated, the brief panic now gone and replaced by his usual bravado.

...

"Delphox, Flamethrower in a wide arc! Minicorn, use Double Kick on that approaching Tanscure!"

"Chespin, Iron Head! Nucleon, Shadow Ball!"

In the western part of the route, Serena and Clemont already had their Pokemon out -minus Luxray, who was back at Legen taking care of Bonnie-, and were facing a group of Nuclear-types. As the rangers had said, they were attacking indiscriminately every non-Nuclear Pokemon that got in their line of sight. Fortunately, it seemed that the new group of Pokemon were enough of a threat to keep most of the Nuclear group's attention on them, and all of them fought with resolve and courage, following the instructions of their respective trainers when possible.

All of them minus one.

"Syl..."

Sylveon hadn't joined the fray, choosing to remain next to Serena, looking apprehensively at the battle in front of her. The honey blonde knew that the Intertwining Pokemon hadn't overcome her fear of Nuclear-types yet, so she wanted to give her enough time to psyche herself up. Serena believed that fighting alongside all her teammates would make Sylveon less fearful of the radioactive Pokemon. But given that the fight had been going on for some time, it was obvious that Sylveon had no intention of fighting.

"Sylveon," Serena said, her eyes still fixed on the battle in front of her. "If you aren't going to battle, you can return to your pokeball. You'll be safer there."

"Sylve..." Sylveon whined, looking at the battle. She raised a leg as if to take a step forward, but the moment a Nuclear attack hit the ground, creating a small explosion, the Eeveelution flinched.

"Sylveon, I'm not going to think any less of you if you sit this one out," Serena gently said. "I understand that, for this kind of enemy, you might not be at your best, and I don't want to force you to do something you don't want to."

Still, Sylveon looked undecided. Serena could tell that her desire to join and help her teammates and her fear of Nuclear-types were tearing her apart on the inside. Unfortunately for Serena, she had no time to reassure Sylveon right now.

"Sorry Sylveon, but I need to-"

"SYL!"

Faster than Serena could see, Sylveon leaped forward, waving her feeler and releasing a flurry of golden stars. The stars then homed towards a Nuclear Eshouten that was diving at Delphox, who was busy fending off a Nuclear Trawpint with Hidden power, and thus

didn't see the enemy above her. The golden stars smashed into the flier, blasting it backwards.

"D-Del...?" Delphox asked, a little startled, only having noticed the Eshouten now, and then looked at Sylveon. "Phox, delphox!"

"S-Syl...?" Sylveon asked, and looked around in confusion, as if still trying to process what she just did.

"Sylveon, you saved Delphox!" Serena beamed. It seemed that Sylveon's love and desire to protect her friends and teammates was indeed stronger than her fear of Nuclear-types.

"S-Syl, sylveon!" Sylveon happily cried, once the implications of her action finally sunk in.

"See? There's nothing you need to fear! Just like how you protected your friends, they can protect you too!" Serena told her.

Sylveon nodded, and with renewed confidence, joined her teammates in battle. Even if she stayed cautiously close to Delphox, she wasn't letting her fear stop her from helping.

"Chespin, catch that Kinetmunk with Vine Whip!" Clemont shouted. "And Bunnelby, Mud Shot!"

As said Kinetmunk leaped at them, Chespin caught it mid air with his whips, before Bunnelby launched several globs of mud at the Nuclear Pokemon, making it cry in pain, before Chespin tossed it away.

"Well done!" Serena praised Clemont's Pokemon, before addressing their trainer. "Come on, we need to push them back. We can-"

Serena was interrupted by a crackling noise, as Chespin's entire body was enveloped by a bright, blueish-white light, and began to grow in size, while his body became rounder, and the spikes on his head became longer. Everybody watched in awe how Chespin

evolved, especially Pancham, who looked with his mouth agape and eyes wide open.

"Quill, quilladin!" The newly evolved Pokemon cheered.

"Chespin, you evolved!" Clemont cried in joy.

"Din, quill!" Quilladin happily replied, giving his trainer a thumbs up.

"That's so fortuitous! That will make this battle a little easier now," Clemont said. "Come on Quilladin, show them what you can do!"

"Qui, quilla!" Quilladin excitedly agreed, as he turned towards a pair of incoming Nuclear Gligar that dived towards them from above.

"QUI!"

A pair of vines grew out of Quilladin's body and lashed out towards the aerial Nuclear Pokemon with resounding cracks, instantly knocking the attacking Pokemon out cold.

"Whoa! Look at the power of that Vine Whip!" Clemont said, sharing his Pokemon's excitement. "See Quilladin? This isn't just evolution, but the fruit of your hard work. If you keep improving yourself, you'll be able to accomplish amazing things!"

"Quill, din!" Quilladin agreed.

"Now let's keep going. There are many Nuclear Pokemon still left!"

...

"We're going to face a *Nuclear Gyarados*!?" Theo asked in shock.

Once Ash and Theo had cleared the area of Nuclear Pokemon, they were told by a Ranger that a Nuclear Gyarados has been seen emerging from a nearby lake, and that since Ash had already took down one in Bealbeach City, he was the best suited to face it, something the trainer from Pallet agreed to without hesitation, so he

recalled all his Pokemon and headed towards the spot the Gyarados was last seen.

Of course, Theo was far less eager to fight a Nuclear Pokemon of such size and power. Not that Ash would blame him, having seen his fair of Gyarados, Ash felt a little worried over the prospect of facing one himself.

"You don't have to come with me," Ash told the redhead, as he ran towards the area the Ranger had told him about, with Theo trailing behind him. "I'm sure there are other Nuclear Pokemon causing trouble that you could deal with."

"N-No! This won't be a repeat of Comet Cave! I'm not running away a second time!" Theo insisted. While Theo didn't appear too ashamed of running away in terror when that giant Terlard appeared, it seemed that over time, he began to regret that moment, if his current reaction was anything to go by.

The sound of a terrifying roar, followed by explosions which were without doubt the result of Pokemon attacks let Ash and Theo know that they were going in the correct direction. They were quickly greeted with the sight of a Nuclear Gyarados, in all its horrifying glory, towering over a single Baaschaf, who stood protectively in front of a couple of frightened Baashaun. The Baaschaf shot a Shadow Ball at the Gyarados, but the Nuclear Pokemon batted it away with an Aqua Tail, before trying to smash the Hard Horn Pokemon with its water-covered tail.

"Metalynx, I choose you!" Ash said, throwing a pokeball forward. "Protect those Pokemon from the Gyarados! Use Iron Tail!"

As soon as Metalynx emerged from the pokeball, the Armored Pokemon leaped towards the Gyarados, her tail glowing with a silvery light, and used it to parry the Aqua Tail before it could hit the Baaschaf, the clash of tails producing a shockwave and a burst of wind in every direction.

"Get out of here! We'll take care of this one!" Ash told the wild Pokemon.

The black-wooled sheep seemingly understood, as they ran away as fast as possible, while Gyarados glared at the Grass and Steel-type Pokemon.

"Let's go, Metalyx!" Theo said, sending his starter, who materialized next to Ash's. He opened his mouth to order an attack, but then he closed it for some reason, before looking at Ash. "Uh, what's the plan, Ash? Should we attack together?"

"Yes. If we attack from different angles at once, we'll be able to take it down," Ash told him.

"Sounds great! Have your Metalyx use a ranged move so mine can get closer!" Theo suggested.

"Very well! Metalyx, Energy Ball!" Ash ordered.

"Use Leaf Blade, Metalyx!" Theo ordered as well.

Ash's Metalyx opened her mouth and fired an emerald orb of energy at Gyarados. The Atrocious Pokemon countered it by breathing a wall of blue and purple flames at it -and attack Ash identified as Dragon Rage,- however, Theo's Metalyx was already leaping at the Nuclear beast, its tail glowing with a bright green glow, before delivering a powerful swipe at Gyarados. The Nuclear Pokemon roared in pain, as it exhaled another stream of flames, this time bright orange, at both starter Pokemon, which were forced to jump back.

"Whoa! I didn't know that Gyarados could use Fire-type moves!" Theo shouted, looking at the Water and Nuclear-type with increased terror.

"Now you know. Gyarados are truly powerful Pokemon, and a Nuclear one even more so. That's why we need to finish this battle

as soon as possible," Ash urged.

"Maybe we could send more Pokemon out..." Theo fearfully suggested.

Ash shook his head. "That's what I did the first time, but it won't be necessary this time around," Ash confidently said, as he held his shuriken necklace, and touched the Keystone inside it. "Alright Metalyx, let's do this, together! Mega Evolve!"

Both the Keystone and Megastone glowed with a bright light, as beams of shining energy fired from each stone towards the other. The beams clashed in the middle, merging together, as Metalyx's own body shone with a bright white aura, while her body began to grow and change. Once the transformation was complete, the glowing aura disappeared as the Mega Evolution helix flashed in front of her.

Needless to say, the transformation had a profound effect on Theo.

"WHOA! Just... what was that!?" Theo asked, and started to tug Ash's arm. "I didn't know Metalyx could do that! How did you do it!? Please tell me!"

"I'll tell you later, now focus on the fight ahead!" Ash told Theo.

Fortunately, the boy complied. "Metalyx, Magical Leaf!"

"Follow with Night Slash, Metalyx!" Ash ordered.

Glowing leaves burst from Metalyx's body and homed onto the Nuclear Gyarados, cutting it with their sharp edges. Ash's Metalyx then leaped forward, its arm blade coated in an aura of darkness, before delivering a powerful swipe just under the Gyarados' head.

"GYAAAA!" Gyarados roared in pain, before glaring at the two Armored Pokemon, as blue and purple flames began to pour out of its open maws.

"Watch out, it's going to use Dragon Rage!" Ash warned Theo.

"Metallix, Dig!" Theo ordered.

"Counter with X-Scissor!" Ash replied.

As Theo's Metallix quickly burrowed underground, Ash's own delivered a pair of horizontal swipes with her front paws, launching an X-shaped greenish-yellow energy blast at Gyarados, which plowed through the Dragon Rage until it smashed against the Nuclear's Pokemon face. And right after that, Theo's Metallix emerged from below, delivering a powerful swipe at Gyarados' body.

After those last two attacks, the Nuclear monster began to wobble, before dropping onto the ground with a loud thud, defeated. While its new Nuclear type gave it a huge boost in offensive power, it came at the expense of becoming much more frail.

"Whoa... we did it!" Theo said. "We beat that Nuclear Gyarados!"

"Yes, we did," Ash said good naturedly, before growing more serious. "However, there are still plenty of Nuclear Pokemon wreaking havoc around the area. It won't be over until we push them back.

"Alright!" Theo nodded.

...

Meanwhile, on the western side of the area, Serena and Clemont continued directing their Pokemon as they continued pushing back the Nuclear Horde. Unlike Ash and Theo, they had the luck not to encounter another Nuclear Gyarados, so their progress was much quicker.

As they directed their Pokemon, though, neither of them noticed that one of them had slipped away.

"Nu! Nucleon!"

Nucleon ran as fast as his legs allowed him to. One of the good things of evolution was that his longer legs allowed for longer strides. He could also sense Nuclear Pokemon from a distance, as he had recently found out. He didn't know if it was something unique to him, or if all Nuclear-types could sense each other. Maybe he could ask Geigeroach when all this was over.

Nucleon heard the cry of help of a distant Pokemon, a mother and her baby were under attack. The Atomic Pokemon had tried to warn Clemont, but his trainer was too busy with the current battle, and couldn't listen to him. Meaning that he had to do it himself.

"Shaabak!"

There she was. As he emerged from behind the shrubbery, he saw a badly battered Arbok battling several Nuclear Pokemon, while standing protectively in front of its Ekans: a Baaschaf, a Flaaffy, two Tancoon and a Gligar. The Arbok fought fiercely, but it was clearly outnumbered and outmatched. The Arbok tried to bite a diving Gligar, but the Fly Scorpion Pokemon moved away at the last second, and the Arbok got a painful Fire Punch from the Baaschaf, followed by a Thundershock from the Flaaffy.

"Shaaa... !" The Arbok cried.

"Ekans, ekans!" The Ekans worriedly hissed for its mother.

No time to waste!

"Cleon!" Nucleon cried as he dashed towards the Baaschaf, as green sparks crackled around his body, leaving a light green trail of light behind him, smashing against the Hard Horn Pokemon with a Nuclear-empowered Quick Attack.

"Shaab?" The Arbok asked confusedly. It clearly wasn't expecting one Nuclear Pokemon to attack their own.

"Nu, nucleon, nu!" Nucleon yelled, hoping that the Arbok could understand that he was on its side. Now it and its Ekans needed to get away. "Cleon, cle!"

Arbok nodded, and it and its Ekans slithered away as fast as it could, leaving Nucleon alone against the group of feral Pokemon.

"BAAAAAA!"

The Baaschaf didn't take kindly being sucker punched like Nucleon did, and prepared a counterattack, both its forearms glowing white, an attack Nucleon couldn't identify but guessed that it would be a Fighting-type move (and that it would hurt a lot), so he quickly moved aside the moment the forearm came down, smashing against the ground with great force.

As he dodged, Nucleon swung his detached tail, glowing with a silvery sheen, smacking Baaschaf in the face with a powerful Iron Tail, sending it rolling backwards.

"FLAAAA!"

Nucleon was forced to dodge again when the Nuclear Flaaffy sent another Thundershock his way, missing its mark and leaving a small patch of grass charred. He then opened his mouth, and prepared a Shadow Ball as a counterattack.

"TAN!"

Before Nucleon could attack, one of the Tancoon got close and sunk its electrified teeth onto the Atomic Pokemon's soft flesh, making Nucleon cry at the pain the Thunder Fang was causing him. And before that, the second Tancoon slammed against him with a strong Tackle, sending him skidding backwards.

"Nu... nuc..." Nucleon wheezed. Now he was starting to realize that taking on multiple enemies on his own wasn't among his brightest ideas.

"GLIIIIII!"

Even if the Gligar's shadow hadn't alerted him, then the Gligar's loud screech would have done the deed. Seeing the Fly Scorpion Pokemon diving at him ready to strike with a Fury Cutter, but Nucleon took no time to direct a Shadow Ball at it, blasting it out of the air.

"CHAAF!"

Unfortunately, that left him wide open for other attacks, and the Baaschaf took the opportunity to deliver him a slash with a claw made of dark energy that extended from its hand, probably a Shadow Claw, but that didn't matter to Nucleon as much as how much the attack hurt him.

"COON! TANCOO!"

And before he had any time to recover, he was hit by two Gamma Rays fired from each of the Tancoon's open jaws. The attack didn't hurt as badly as the others, but it distracted him long enough for the Gligar to nail him with an Acrobatic, which did.

"Nuc! Nuuuuu... !" Nucleon screamed, as he was sent rolling backwards by the Flying-type move.

Every fiber of his body hurt. Trying to get back on his feet only caused his body to ache even more. As the feral Nuclear Pokemon closed by, Nucleon could see the foolery of his actions, trying to take on such a large group on his own. He could see the Baaschaf menacingly approaching as it clenched a hand into a fist which was quickly coated in flames.

"BAAAA!" the Dark and Nuclear-type Pokemon cried, bringing the fiery fist down.

Nucleon closed his eyes, and waited for the searing pain to come. There was a loud noise of a fist crashing against something, mixed

with a loud crackle of flames.

But the pain didn't come.

"Nu...?" Nucleon dared to open his three eyes, and saw that the Nuclear Baaschaf was no longer in front of him.

"Syl!"

Instead, he saw Sylveon's back, as the Intertwining Pokemon was facing Baaschaf, who had slammed its fiery fist against a green glowing barrier formed in front of Sylveon. Nucleon blinked, joy mixed with confusion. Did Sylveon just come to his aid?

"Syl, sylveon!" she said, turning her head at him, and smiled.

Oh good lord, she smiled at him.

Suddenly, Nucleon felt his body reinvigorated, as a pleasant warmth washed over his body, as if he was under the effect of a Heal Pulse, despite the fact that no such thing was happening. His body glowed green, as sparks of the same color jumped around his body, before dashing past Sylveon, her Protect already vanishing, slamming bodyfirst against the Baaschaf, which was sent flying backwards by the power of the Take Down.

The other Nuclear Pokemon didn't stay idle, as the two Tancoon quickly lunged at Nucleon, their jaws wide open, ready to sink their teeth into his soft flesh once again.

"Syl-VEON!"

But this time, Nucleon had help. Waving her feelers in an arc, Sylveon sent a flurry of golden stars which homed towards the two leaping Pokemon, smashing against them and blasting them backwards. Flaaffy attempted a Thundershock, but it was intercepted by a Shadow Ball fired by Nucleon, while Sylveon waved her feelers

once again, trapping the Nuclear Gligar inside a sparkly pink tornado with Fairy Wind.

Despite now being alone, the Nuclear Flaaffy's mindless aggression overpowered its survival instinct and continued attacking, this time preparing a Electro Ball. Nucleon, however, dodged it with the help of a Quick Attack, and using the burst of speed to get closer, knocked the corrupted Pokemon out with an Iron Tail.

No more Nuclear Pokemon remained in the zone. It was safe, for the time being at the very least.

"Nu?" Nucleon asked, taking a tentative step towards Sylveon.

This time, Sylveon didn't move, nor flinch, nor cry, nor tried to hide. He took another step, and Sylveon didn't move.

However, before he could take another step, Sylveon extended one of her feelers and gently wrapped it around Nucleon's face. The Nuclear-type Pokemon happily purred.

"Syl. Sylveon, veon, ve, syl" she solemnly said. She admitted that her bad experiences in the beach city let her extend said fear to Nucleon, even if he didn't do anything to warrant such reaction. But after prodding from her friends and trainer, and looking at him from afar, she began to wonder if lumping him with the rest of the Nuclear-types was unfair.

And how Nucleon risked his life to save that Arbok and Ekans dispelled the last of her doubts.

"Veon, syl?" she asked.

Of course Nucleon would forgive her.

"Ral, tzoral!" a caw came from above.

"There you are!" Nucleon and Sylveon turned around, and saw Serena running towards them, her face a mask of worry, while

Quetzoral flew above her. "You guys just left without saying anything! Clemont and I were worried that something happened to you! Thank goodness Quetzoral could look for you from the air!"

"Syl..." Sylveon whined, and lowered her head.

Serena sighed, but smiled. "It's okay. You probably saw or heard more Pokemon in danger, didn't you?" she asked Sylveon, as she gently patted her head. Serena then looked at Nucleon, and let out a small gasp, as if she realized something. "Sylveon! Nucleon is right there, but you aren't panicking!"

"Syl, sylveon!" Sylveon happily said.

"Oh Sylveon, you got over your fear of Nuclear-types!" Serena said, pulling Sylveon into a hug. "I'm so proud of you!"

...

A few hours later, the Nuclear Horde had been pushed back to Vinoville, with many Nuclear Pokemon being captured by the Rangers. They would be sent to all the Pokemon Laboratories in the region, so the Pokemon Professors could study them and develop ways of containing them.

Now, the group, as well as the rest of the trainers who volunteered to help the Rangers were at the edge of Legen Town, with Wendy and some of her Rangers in front of them,

"In the name of the Tandor Ranger Corps, thank you for your help today," Wendy said, as she and the Rangers flanking her bowed respectfully. "Thanks to you, today we managed to reduce the damage of an otherwise unspeakable catastrophe. While Vinoville and the Wheatfields are lost, at the very least we kept the Nature Preserve and Legen Town safe."

"What will happen to all the people from Vinoville?" a trainer asked.

"We're already relocating them in Legen Town. While many of the townspeople here offered to share homes with the people from Vinoville, it won't be enough to hold everybody, so we will be setting up shelters both here and in other towns and cities to accommodate them," Wendy began to explain.

"Who made this? Because I refuse to believe that the Zeta Plant would blow up so soon after Epsilon's accident," another trainer asked.

"No, it wasn't an accident. Just like with Epsilon, an army of Nuclear Pokemon attacked the plant. Why did they do it, we don't know," Wendy continued. "Thankfully, an anonymous source warned us of the attack, so we were able to evacuate the people in Vinoville and the Wheatfields before the worst came to happen.

"There's nothing more to say. Once again, thanks a lot to all of you for your help today. Hopefully, we will be able to reach to the bottom of this mystery, and find the source of these attacks," Wendy finally said. "Be careful out there."

The Rangers then left, and the group of trainer volunteers dispersed as well. Ash and his friends, plus Theo, decided to return to the Pokemon Center. The sun was starting to set, their Pokemon needed healing and their trainers needed rest. It had been a very long day.

"You were amazing out there, Theo," Ash said, patting the boy on the pack.

"Pi, pikachu!" Pikachu happily agreed.

"Uh, thanks. I tried my best," Theo said, turning a little red at the praise. "Hopefully we managed to make a difference today."

"Didn't you hear the Ranger? Of course we did," Serena interjected. "Thanks to all our efforts, we protected the Pokemon from the Nature

Preserve and ensured that the people from Vinoville could get safely to another town."

"What that trainer said is worrying, though," Ash stated, as he placed a hand under his chin. "These attacks, so soon one after the other... it can't be a coincidence..."

"Why are all the Nuclear Pokemon attacking the Power Plants all of sudden now?" Theo asked, crossing his arms.

"Who knows. Nuclear radiation turns normal Pokemon into Nuclear-types, so maybe they're doing it to reproduce, but... I don't know, it feels contrived," Clemont unsurely suggested.

"Regardless of the reason, I'd say the chances of another attack on a power plant is high," Ash deduced. "Do you know where the other power plants are?"

Serena opened her tablet, and began to tap on the screen. After a few seconds, she already had the answer. "Right now, the last power plant is Nuclear Plant Omicron. It's located on East Tandor, on an island south of Venesi City."

"Pretty far away, huh?" Ash asked. "Still, that doesn't mean it can't be attacked. Epsilon was on an island as well."

"Pika," Pikachu nodded.

"I'm pretty sure that, after these attacks, they're already tightening the security at Omicron," Clemont stated.

They silently nodded, hoping that whatever measures of security would take, it would be enough to avert another disaster.

"Hey, that Ranger woman... she said it was an anonymous person who tipped them about the attack," Theo began. "Do you think it was... my dad?"

"Maybe. Didn't you say he was going undercover to find who was causing this?" Ash asked.

"Yeah," Theo said, before looking back to the north. "I hope he wasn't close when everything went up in flames..."

Ash placed a hand on Theo's shoulder. "If he was able to warn the Rangers so they could evacuate the people, I'm sure he was also able to get to safety as well."

"Yes. Cameron is quite the veteran trainer. His skills and his Pokemon will keep him safe," Clemont added.

Theo nodded, and continued walking with the rest of Ash's group towards the Pokemon Center. Then, his mood suddenly improved, and turned towards Ash, his eyes shining with a glint of excitement. "By the way Ash, I almost forgot! That transformation you did with your Metalynx back there! How did you do it? Please tell me!"

"Oh, you mean Mega Evolution?" Ash asked, chuckling a bit. "Say, do you remember that Vaeryn guy we met towards the end of Comet Cave? Well..."

Author's Note: Heh, you thought that I was going to skip the second plant meltdown, didn't you? Given that it happens right after you beat Sheldon and you're instantly taken to Legen Town. That was the original plan, but I realized that doing a contest right after another plant blew up... yeah, that wasn't going to work, it would have been way to jarring. So the solution was to simply move the plant meltdown to after the contest instead.

Here we can see the results of Theo's character development: while he ran away from the giant Terlard when he traveled with Ash through Comet Cave, here he's willing to stay and fight a powerful and terrifying enemy such as a Nuclear Gyarados.

And at last, Sylveon finally overcame her fear of Nuclear-types! Yeah, given the situation, this was the best moment for Sylveon for finally getting over her fear. I'm pretty sure many of you were hoping for it to happen, since it looked like she was progressing a bit slowly on that front.

Theo and Sylveon aren't the only ones who got some development, given that Chespin's previous hard work paid off in the form of an evolution! The second of Clemont's Pokemon to evolve in this story, and the first of his original team. Honestly, I felt that Chespin needed the evolution more than Bunnelby, given that the latter was shown to be a pretty decent battler while unevolved, while Chespin not so much. But this isn't the end of the road for the former comic relief, as he will continue working hard, and hey, maybe he may evolve again sometime down the road ;)

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Next chapter, our heroes plan their next move and resume their journey, this time for real without any more disasters (for the time being) and... let's say that there's going to be quite the upheaval among Serena's Pokemon. You'll see why soon. Now, don't forget to drop those reviews!

Ties that Bind, Ties that Break

Chapter 39:

Ties that Bind, Ties that Break

Route 9

It had been a couple days since the incident at Power Plant Zeta, and the group continued their trip towards Amatree Town, their next destination, where Ash would win his fifth badge and Serena would hopefully win her fifth and last ribbon.

Route 9, also known as Fire Valley, was a grassy, forested zone surrounded by many peaks. The place was hard to traverse, but it was the fastest way for the group to reach Amatree Town. Hopefully, they would arrive with enough time for Serena's contest.

Given that they were making a pretty good time, they decided to set up camp for the time being. While Clemont, Bonnie and most of the Pokemon relaxed, Ash and Serena decided to have a sparring match.

"Alright Quetzoral, use Razor Leaf! And Minicorn, combine that attack with Fairy Wind!" Serena said.

Quetzoral beat her wings, releasing a flurry of razor-edged leaves forward, which were quickly caught inside a pink, sparkly tornado summoned by Minicorn.

"Frosulo, use Protect! Raptorch, get behind Frosulo!" Ash replied.

"Fro!"

"Ra, rap!"

Raptorch hid behind his partner as the Ice Crystal Pokemon generated a green energy barrier that blocked the attack, producing a burst of wind mist and green leaves as it crashed uselessly against the shield.

"Very well! Now Raptorch, Flamethrower! And Frosulo, Signal Beam!" Ash ordered.

Raptorch took a deep breath before exhaling a torrent of red and orange flames towards Serena's Pokemon, while Frosulo fired a multicolored beam from his antennae.

"Quetzoral, fly high to dodge! Minicorn, charge forward!" Serena ordered.

The Canopy Pokemon began to flap her wings as fast as she could in order to gain altitude and avoid the Fire Dino's Pokemon fiery attack, while Minicorn charged forward, sidestepping when necessary to dodge Frosulo's Bug-type energy attack.

"Now, Minicorn, Charge Beam on Frosulo!" Serena ordered.

As the Foal Pokemon drew closer, her forehead horn crackled with yellow electricity, as it fired from it a straight electric beam at the Ice Crystal Pokemon.

"Raptorch, intercept it!" Ash quickly shouted.

"Ra, rap!"

The Fire Dino Pokemon jumped between Minicorn and his partner, taking the attack, which harmlessly washed over him.

"You fell for it! Quetzoral, Drill Peck, now!" Serena cried in triumph.

"Queeeeeetz!" Quetzoral cawed, as it dashed towards Raptorch, her beak glowing with a white aura which began to spin like a drill.

"Not so fast! Frosulo, snare her with String Shot!" Ash replied.

"Suuuu!" Frosulo chirped, before firing a sticky thread from his unseen mouth, getting the Canopy Pokemon all entangled in the stings, causing her to miss and crash painfully against the ground.

"Quetzoral! Are you okay?" Serena worriedly asked.

"Tzo... !" Quetzoral said, getting back on her tail and wiping the sticky thread from her wings. "Quetz!"

She sighed in relief. "Well, thank goodness it wasn't that bad," the honey blonde said.

"Wow, that was embarrassing," a new, unpleasant voice said in a taunting manner. "If your Pokemon fall for such obvious tricks, I don't think you'll ever make it to the Grand Festival."

Everybody turned around, and much to their surprise (and disgust) they saw Sayaka, in her black and red ninja uniform, a smug grin plastered on her face.

"You!" Serena said, frowning. "What are you doing here?"

"What? Am I not allowed to be here or something?" the ninja replied, her tone still taunting.

"You know what I mean," Serena said, as she walked towards her, holding her gaze. "You already won your fifth ribbon. Shouldn't you be on a boat to Venesi City already?"

"The Grand Festival is more than two months away, so I have time," Sayaka replied, shrugging.

"If you came here to further antagonize Serena... !" Clemont began.

"Relax, people. Me finding you guys here was a mere coincidence. Not that I need to reveal my reasons to be here or there, but if it's for the sake of avoiding an unnecessary confrontation..." Sayaka said in a somewhat bored and irritated tone. "I'm here looking for Dusk

Stones in order to evolve my Misdreavus into Mismagius. I was told that you can find Dusk Stones around these parts."

"I see. Well, in that case, don't let our presence slow you down in your search," Ash said, as the boy crossed his arms, hinting to the unfriendly ninja to go away.

And she was about to, when something caught her eye. "That Pokemon I see... is that Minicorn yours?"

Minicorn tilted her head upon hearing her name,

"Yes, I'm her trainer," Serena told her. "What about it?"

"I see. And I guess that you'd like to evolve her into Kiricorn, am I right?" Sayaka asked, her smug grin growing wider.

Serena stammered a little, and looked at Minicorn, before looking back at Sayaka. "I mean... sure, if she's okay with it..."

"Yeah, you look like somebody who'd love to have a Kiricorn, don't you? Well, today may be your lucky day!" Sayaka said, as she began to dig for something inside her backpack. "Feast your eyes upon this!"

Everybody looked at the item Sayaka was showing, a grayish-white crystalline stone, with a dim golden light glowing from the inside.

"Is that...?" Ash began.

"A Shiny Stone!" Clemont finished.

"So what if that stone is shiny?" Bonnie asked, unimpressed.

Sayaka rolled her eyes at Bonnie's comment, but decided to elaborate: "A Shiny Stone is an evolutionary stone that Minicorn needs in order to evolve into Kiricorn. I was looking for one to evolve my Luxor, but I managed to find two. Would you like to have it?" Sayaka asked. "Aw look, it seems your Minicorn likes it!"

And indeed, the Foal Pokemon was looking at the evolutionary stone with her eyes wide open and glinting, as if completely enthralled by the rock.

"But let me guess, you aren't going to give it to me just like that, right?" Serena asked, fearing what the arrogant ninja may want to ask her in exchange for the stone.

"Obviously not. These stones are very rare and valuable. Before you ask no, I'm not going to ask you for money, since I don't need it," Sayaka said. "So, let's make a little deal: help me look for a Dusk Stone in the area. If you manage to find one before me, I'll trade it for this Shiny Stone. If I manage to find one first... well, tough luck."

"Why are you proposing this? Serena is your rival. Wouldn't it make more sense to look for the stone yourself and not tell us that?" Clemont asked.

Sayaka snorted. "Trust me, relying on others is not something I take pleasure in doing. But I already wasted two days fruitlessly looking for that accursed Dusk Stone. Maybe with more people and Pokemon looking around, I can finally find one and continue with my journey."

Ash and his friends all looked at each other.

"So, what do you guys say? Should we help her?" Ash asked.

Serena looked at Minicorn, who looked a bit disappointed now that Sayaka had put the Shiny Stone back on her bag. Kiricorn was a Pokemon Serena would have loved to have in her team, and if Minicorn wanted to evolve, then it was a win-win, right?

"Okay, let's help her," Serena finally decided.

"Excellent. Let's begin the search then. I'll look over that area," Sayaka said, pointing at a cluster of trees to the south. "You should

split into two groups and check the lake to the northeast and the small hill to the northwest."

"Clemont and I will take the lake. I know my brother isn't fond of climbing hills," Bonnie offered.

"Bonnie!" Clemont protested.

The lemon blonde shot her older brother an unamused stare. "Am I lying?"

Clemont reddened a little as he looked aside. "You didn't have to say it that way..."

"Alright. In that case, Serena and I will look on the hill then," Ash said. "Let's meet up here in two hours, alright?"

They all nodded, and the three subgroups went to check the three areas.

...

Ash and Serena were walking around the hill that they agreed to inspect. The hill was indeed small, and its slope wasn't as pronounced as Bonnie made it look, meaning that somebody as unathletic as Clemont wouldn't have much trouble climbing it. Oh well, it's not like they minded the place in particular.

Aside from Pikachu, Ash had also brought Aveden and Raptorch to help find the stone, while Serena had brought Quetzoral and Pancham. While Aveden and Quetzoral looked from the sky, their trainers and their groundbound Pokemon looked below. According to Ash, a Dusk Stone was dark purple in color, so if there were any stones like that around these parts, they would be somewhere where they wouldn't stand out, or else somebody would have claimed them already.

"So Serena, are you happy that Minicorn will finally be able to evolve?" Ash asked, as he looked under a bush.

"Sure. Though, I'm glad that Minicorn is on board with the idea. As much as I think Kiricorn is an impressive Pokemon, I wouldn't want to impose on Minicorn something she doesn't want," Serena said, as she looked under a large rock Pancham had flipped over.

"I still remember Maria's Kiricorn. Even Greninja had trouble with it," Ash said, recalling his first Gym match of the region. "Oh I know! Once Kiricorn evolves, you should challenge Sayaka to a battle! I bet that with Kiricorn at your side, you'll beat her this time around!"

Serena shook her head. "As much as I'd like the idea, I think I'm going to refrain from doing that. I don't want to make the same mistake I did on the cruise."

"Oh, I see..." Ash said, a little disappointed. "Well, how about you use Kiricorn in a battle against me then?"

This drew a smile from the honey blonde. "That, I can do."

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu warned, pointing to the sky.

Ash looked upwards, and saw that Aveden was flying towards him. He was carrying something between his talons, something that glinted with the sunlight. Had Aveden found a Dusk Stone?

"Ave, aveden!" he happily whistled, as he dropped his cargo onto Ash's hands once he was close enough.

"Is that...?" Serena asked, holding her breath.

Ash shook his head. "A Thunderstone. An evolutionary stone used to evolve some Electric-type Pokemon, Pikachu included," Ash said, much to Aveden's disappointment, who lowered his head and let out a sad whistle. "Sorry pal, but this isn't what we were looking for. The

Dusk Stone is much darker in color. Come on, put it back where you found it. Maybe somebody else can find it and give it some use."

"Ave!" Aveden said, before taking off once again.

As they continued the search, something else dawned upon Ash.

"Hey Serena, now that I remember, Kiricorn can Mega Evolve! And given that you already have a Keystone, maybe we should look for a Mega Stone for her after this!"

"Yeah, we could. Though, Mega Stones tend to be rare and hard to find," Serena pointed out.

"We can always ask Alain the next time we see him, given that that's the kind of job he normally does for Professor Sycamore. Maybe he even found one with some luck!" Ash said.

Serena took a moment to look at the ring on her index finger. "Yeah. It's been a while since I got this Keystone, and it would be nice to get some use out of it."

"Well, you can use it on Selkid if she ever evolves," Ash pointed out.

"Yeah. Though, I was expecting that she would have evolved by now," Serena mentioned.

"Oh...?" Ash asked, raising an eyebrow.

"It's not that I want Selkid to evolve at all costs," Serena quickly amended. "I've been reading about Selkid on the Pokedex, and I saw that their evolution is triggered by a deep emotional bond. In a trained one, said bond is the one she forms with her trainer."

"So if she evolves, it will mean that she formed a very strong bond with you, right?" Ash asked, and Serena nodded. "Don't worry. Even if it doesn't happen, anybody can see what a great bond you formed with Selkid. Especially since Selkid had such bad experiences with humans."

This managed to draw a small smile from the honey blonde.

"Hey, I just thought of something," Ash said, sounding like he was about to switch the topic. "I remember seeing the cover of a romantic novel that showed a man and a woman riding together on a Rapidash. Do girls like that?"

Serena's smile turned into an amused smirk. "Why? Are you planning for the two of us to ride Kiricorn together once she evolves?"

"If you're for it, sure! Kiricorn would be big enough to carry the two of us," Ash excitedly said. "And if Kiricorn is okay with it, of course."

"Well, I wouldn't be against the idea..." Serena said, blushing a little.

"I have some experience riding equine Pokemon. I can teach you if you want," Ash offered.

Serena quirked an eyebrow, as an amused smile spread across her lips. "Ash, should I remind you that I have plenty of experience on Pokemon riding? My mom trained me on Rhyhorn Racing, and I even beat her during that Skiddo race."

"Oh, right! Hehe, my bad..." Ash sheepishly said, rubbing the back of his head. "Oh well, that's one less thing to worry about! Once Minicorn evolves into Kiricorn, you'll ride her and I'll sit behind you."

"Me? But I thought that you'd be the one riding her and I'd be sitting behind you..." Serena said.

"But Kiricorn is your Pokemon. I don't think it'd be right for me to ride her instead of you," Ash replied.

"Oh... right, you're right," Serena said.

While a part of Serena was a little disappointed over Ash running her fantasy or holding him from behind while the two rode Kiricorn,

another part of her couldn't help but feel warm over such a considerate gesture.

Little things like that were the reason why she liked Ash.

...

Meanwhile, the Lumiose siblings were inspecting the lake area. Clemont brought Luxray and Eletux to help with their search, Luxray because of his enhanced vision, and Eletux so he could search under the water, even if the Hippocampus Pokemon was proving to be less than useful, being more interested in annoying the group of Buizel living there, and shooting with Water Gun the Birbie and Owten that sometimes flew above the lake.

"Lux, luxray!" The Gleam Eyes Pokemon growled at his mischievous teammate in a harsh, scolding tone.

"Tuuuuux..." Eletux replied, as if begrudgingly accepting Luxray's protest, before diving underwater to continue with the search.

Bonnie was searching on her own, while Dedenne scurried around. Bonnie had told him to keep his eyes peeled for the Dusk Stone, but the Antennae Pokemon seemed to be more focused on the berry bushes growing near the water.

"I don't think there are any of those stones here," Bonnie said, as she looked under a small bush. "We've been looking for quite a lot of time, and nothing."

"Be patient. These stones are rarely easy to spot. Otherwise somebody else would have taken them sometime ago," Clemont told her.

"Maybe somebody else already found and took all the stones," Bonnie said, pouting. "You know, it's weird that you haven't cooked up some kind of invention for this situation with a lame name, like 'the evolutionary stone radar finder' or something like that."

"It has been on my to-do list, but I've been occupied with other projects," Clemont said, before adding: "And the name is not lame!"

"Sure thing, brother," she said, rolling her eyes. "And what projects?"

"Well... mostly related to Team Omega stuff... still working on that helmet... and trying to figure out how they copied my Aipom Arm..." Clemont began.

"Suuuuure, and none of those projects involving texting and calling Lilia, do they?" Bonnie asked in a somewhat annoyed, but still teasing tone.

"L-Lilia? What does she have to do with anything?" Clemont asked.

"So you don't deny that you've been talking with her a lot when you think no one's watching," Bonnie stated matter-of-factly.

Clemont reddened. "W-Well, of course I talk with her a lot! She's the reason we're in Tador to begin with! And why do you mean 'when no one is watching'?"

"Yes, we know she and she alone is the reason we came to this region," Bonnie said, rolling her eyes.

"Wh-what's that supposed to mean?" Clemont sputtered. "Anyway, why do I need to justify myself over how much I talk with Lilia? That's none of your business!"

"It is, since you're my brother!" Bonnie protested.

"Ugh, this is like the last time! I thought that this is what you wanted, but you're so hostile to her? Why? What has Lilia ever done to you?" Clemont protested.

Bonnie didn't say anything. Crossing her arms, she turned her back at Clemont. "... I don't think she's good for you."

"Oh? And why not?"

"NENE!"

Upon hearing the cry of pain, Bonnie's head immediately snapped in Dedenne's direction, with Clemont behind her, and the lemon blonde quickly ran towards her partner, who was nursing his hurt mouth.

"Dedenne!" a worried Bonnie said. "Are you okay? What happened? Did somebody hurt you?"

"There don't appear to be any wild Pokemon around these parts..." Clemont said, trying to look for a potential culprit.

"Nene..." Dedenne whined, as he pointed at something on the ground.

Bonnie and Clemont looked in the direction Dedenne was pointing, and saw something sticking out of the berry bush. At first it looked like a dark colored berry, but upon further inspection, they realized it was a rock.

"Is that...?" Clemont began.

Bonnie grabbed the dark rock, and pulled it out of the bush. The rock gleamed with a purple sheen as sunlight passed over it.

"A Dusk Stone!" Bonnie excitedly said. "You found a Dusk Stone, Dedenne, great job!"

"Nene!" Dedenne cheered.

"Good job indeed," Clemont said, smiling. "Now come on, let's get back to the camp and give that stone to Sayaka before she changes her mind."

...

When Ash and Serena returned to the camp, Sayaka was already there. She was standing up, rigid as a pole, with her arms crossed and a frown marring her face, an aura of hostility emanating from her

body that kept the Pokemon away from her. It seemed that, just like them, the ninja also came back empty handed.

"No luck?" Ash asked. Sayaka pouted and looked aside.

"We didn't find any Dusk Stone either," Serena admitted.

"For some reason, I find that easy to believe," Sayaka said.

"You know, given that we agreed to help you, you could show a little more consideration," Ash said in an annoyed tone, his patience with the arrogant ninja wearing thin.

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu agreed.

"Oh please. You aren't helping me out of the goodness of your hearts, but because you want something from me in return," Sayaka fired back. "So save your holier-than-thou attitude for whoever's naïve enough to buy it."

"Guuuuuuuys!"

Fortunately, before an argument could take place, Bonnie's distant shout drew their attention to her. The young blonde ran towards them at a good pace, with her brother a few meters behind, struggling to keep pace, Luxray and Elettix flanking him. Bonnie looked visibly happy and excited, and held something in her right hand high above her head.

Something that gleamed purple under the sunlight.

"Did that little girl...?" Sayaka began, stunned.

"Yes it is! Bonnie found a Dusk Stone!" Serena cheered.

"Look what Dedenne and I found!" Bonnie said, waving the stone as she came closer.

Serena heard Sayaka sigh. "Alright, I see that you are more competent than I gave you credit for. Guess that you're going to have that Shiny Stone in the end. Oh well, I never faced anybody with a Kiricorn, so defeating one might be a worthy challenge."

Unfortunately, none of what Sayaka said would come to pass, because in her excited mood, Bonnie didn't notice a small stone that stuck from the ground, making her trip and sending the stone flying.

"Bonnie!" Clemont and Serena shouted in unison.

"The stone!" Sayaka yelled.

Making a wide arc, the Dusk Stone landed on the ground with a soft thud, but miraculously, it didn't break. It bounced a few more times, but the stone remained whole, finally landing near a spot where all of Serena's Pokemon had gathered. All of them looked at the evolutionary stone on the ground, as if they were afraid that it might shatter into a million shards, but after no such thing happened, they all exhaled sighs of relief.

Well, all of them except Minicorn, who looked at the stone as if it was a treasure of untold value.

"Oh thank goodness, it doesn't look like it's broken," Bonnie said, after her brother helped her back on her feet. "After how long it took us to find it..."

Before anybody had the chance to say or do anything, Minicorn walked towards the stone, and touched it with her hoof.

"Micorn...?" Serena asked.

There was a crackling sound, and Minicorn's body glowed with a bright blueish-white light, as the Foal Pokemon began to grow and change while it absorbed the evolutionary stone.

"NO!" Sayaka shouted. "No, no, no! Look what your stupid mare has done!"

"What the... what's going on?" Clemont asked.

"Minicorn is evolving!" Bonnie said.

"I can see that! But how!? I thought that Minicorn needed a Shiny Stone to evolve!" Serena said.

"It does, in order to evolve into Kiricorn!" Sayaka angrily said, much to Serena's confusion.

Once the evolution was complete and the light vanished, everybody could see the new Pokemon, which just like Sayaka said, wasn't a Kiricorn.

The Pokemon in front of them was also an equine, like Minicorn and Kiricorn, but that was where the similarities ended. If Kiricorn looked majestic, ethereal and magical, this Pokemon was... well, in one word, terrifying. She had a dull purple body, with a wild crimson mane running down her neck and her rear. She had three long yellow horns on her head, one on her forehead and one on each side, plus two more horn-like spikes on her back. She had black eyes with yellow irises, and a long, thin tail ending on a tuft of crimson hair.

Wordlessly, Ash pulled out his Pokedex in order to check into what Pokemon had Minicorn evolve:

"Oblivicorn, the Dark Horse Pokemon, and one of Minicorn's evolutions. Dark/Fairy. Its powers are strongest at night when the moon is not visible. Only a veteran trainer can tame one well enough to ride it." the Pokedex explained.

The newly evolved Oblivicorn looked at Serena with those terrifying yellow eyes, and the Kalosian girl flinched. Oblivicorn rose on her back legs while letting out a loud, reverberating neigh.

Sayaka scoffed, reminding everybody that she was still there. "It serves me right for relying on people like you to help. Enjoy your new Pokemon," the ninja said, before tossing a smoke bomb to her feet, producing a gray cloud. Despite the cloud being dispelled very quickly, Sayaka was nowhere to be seen.

After the ninja's departure, a moment of very uncomfortable silence followed, as people and Pokemon alike looked at the newly evolved Oblivicorn with several degrees of worry. For some reason, Oblivicorn looked really agitated, almost as if she was preparing to attack.

"Alright!" Serena said in a chipper manner, clapping her hands, in an attempt to dispel the building tension. "Maybe that... didn't come out as most of us were expecting, but nonetheless, if this is what Minicorn wanted, who are we to judge her?" she said, as she walked towards the Dark Horse Pokemon. "So, Oblivicorn, how are you feeling-"

The moment Serena came close, Oblivicorn let out a loud neigh and rose over her hind legs, waving her front hooves dangerously close in front of Serena's face.

"AAAAH!" the honey blonde screamed, as she tripped a few steps backwards, before falling on her butt.

"Serena!" a worried Ash said as she rushed towards her, as so did the rest of her Pokemon. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine," Serena said, letting Ash help her back on her feet. "I guess that Oblivicorn is kind of... intense now."

It wasn't rare for many Pokemon's personalities to shift after evolving. There was almost nothing left of the bashful and painfully shy Eevee when she evolved into Sylveon. She simply needed to know what made Oblivicorn tick now.

Wiping the dust from her clothes, Serena attempted to get close to Oblivicorn a second time. "Now, keep calm, okay? It's me, Serena. You haven't forgotten about me, have you?" Serena asked, as she slowly approached Oblivicorn. The equine so far seemed a bit more relaxed. "Great! Now-WHOA!"

"SYL!"

But once again, Oblivicorn's response was violence as she charged towards Serena horn-first. The honey blonde would have been seriously hurt had Sylveon not wrapped her feelers around her and pulled her out of the way.

"H... huh... that was a close one," Serena said almost in a whisper, blinking slowly. "... thanks for the save, Sylveon."

"Oblivicorn! Just what's wrong with you!?" Ash angrily asked. "You could have seriously hurt Serena!"

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu agreed.

This time, it was Delphox who angrily stomped towards the seemingly frenzied mare in order to give her a piece of her mind.

"Del, delphox, del, phox!" Delphox angrily berated Oblivicorn.

Oblivicorn neighed loudly once again, and menacingly rose over her hind legs, waving her front hooves at Delphox as if threatening to stomp her, forcing the Fox Pokemon to back off, before aiming her ignited wand at Oblivicorn.

"Deeeel... !" the Fire-type started hissed.

"No, wait! Please don't fight!" Serena pleaded.

"Del?" Delphox asked, a little confused, but lowered her wand.

"It seems like there's something wrong with Oblivicorn. This sudden hostility is not normal." Clemont observed, before turning towards

Serena. "Maybe we should take her to a Pokemon Center. Perhaps a Nurse Joy can see something we can't."

"Good idea. Better check with a professional," Serena said, as she pulled Oblivicorn's pokeball, making the Dark Horse Pokemon stare at her in shock. "Oblivicorn, re-GAH!"

But before she had the chance to recall her rogue Pokemon, Oblivicorn pretty much blitzed at Serena, becoming little more than a dark purple and crimson blur. This time, it was Ash's Greninja who managed to pick Serena between his arms and move out of the way. In doing so, though, she made Serena drop the pokeball, who landed next to the Dark Horse Pokemon.

"Thank you, Greninja," Serena said as he put her back on the ground, before looking at her Pokemon. "Oblivicorn...?"

The Dark and Fairy-type Pokemon rose a hoof, and brought it down on the pokeball, shattering it into a thousand shards of metal and plastic.

Everybody else, both human and Pokemon alike, gasped in shock.

Serena almost choked, and brought her hands to her mouth.

"O-Oblivicorn...?" Serena repeated, as tears began to form at the corner of her eyes. Why was something like this happening...?

Oblivicorn then galloped away, rising a small cloud of dust in her wake.

"What's going on?" Bonnie asked, a little frightened. "Why is Oblivicorn acting that way? Doesn't she want to be Serena's Pokemon anymore...?"

"I don't know. When my Charizard evolved he didn't obey me at first, and even attacked me sometimes, but he never went as far as trying

to abandon me..." Ash said, sounding like he was feeling out of his depth.

"Well, I plan to find out," Serena said, as she looked at the rest of her Pokemon. "Come on everyone, let's get Oblivicorn back!"

"Good idea! We'll help you!" Ash offered.

"Thanks, but I'd prefer if you stayed at the camp instead," Serena said, shaking her head. "I believe this is something my Pokemon and I need to do on our own."

"Are you sure?" Ash asked.

"Very sure," she firmly replied. "Come on, let's go! Quetzoral, fly ahead and see if you can find Oblivicorn."

"Que, tzo!" the Canopy Pokemon cawed in agreement, before taking off and flying in the same direction Oblivicorn had taken.

Serena and her other four Pokemon continued on foot, as fast as they could.

"How can I pretend to be the next Kalos Queen, to make people smile, if I can't tell what's wrong with my Pokemon?" Serena thought. *"Sorry Ash, but I need to do this alone. Don't worry Oblivicorn, whatever's bothering you, we'll fix it. Together."*

...

Normally, chasing a fleeing Pokemon whose body was designed for long distance running isn't something most people would think of doing. Oblivicorn could run very fast for a long time, and neither Serena nor any of her Pokemon, except maybe Quetzoral, had any chance to catch up to her.

But Serena kept running anyway. Not only because she had a hunch that Oblivicorn wouldn't go very far, but because she had to get her

back. She couldn't rest until she'd find what happened for her to become so hostile towards her trainer the moment Minicorn evolved.

"Look! There she is!"

And turned out, Serena's hunch was right. Oblivicorn was at the edge of a small river, drinking some water. Of course, it didn't take her to notice Serena and the rest of her Pokemon. The equine raised her head and locked eyes with her former trainer, but she didn't make any attempt to flee.

That was good.

"Hello," Serena said, as she began to approach slowly. "Listen, Oblivicorn, I don't know what happened for you to act this way, but whatever it is... we can fix it."

Oblivicorn snorted. Serena didn't know what she just said -she internally cursed how in her hurry to rush behind her Pokemon, she didn't think of taking the PST with her. It would make talking with Oblivicorn all that easier- but that reaction didn't sound good. Still, Serena wasn't going to give up, neither now nor ever.

She took another step. "So why don't you return with us to the camp, huh?" she asked, trying to give her the best of her smiles.

As a reward for her smile, Oblivicorn fired a Charge Beam from her horn to her trainer's feet, making Serena yelp loudly and fall trip backwards. All her Pokemon cried almost in unison and quickly put themselves between their trainer and the rogue Oblivicorn, forming a barrier between them. Oblivicorn glared at her former teammates, who returned the hard stare back in silence.

That's it, until one of the Pokemon broke the silence and took a step forward.

"Sel, selkid, kid, sel, selkid!" Selkid angrily shouted. To Serena, it shouted as if she was chastising Oblivicorn.

Given that Selkid and Oblivicorn had both been under the less than ideal care of Team Omega, the Sea Nymph Pokemon had the strongest tie with Oblivicorn.

"Sel, kid, sel!" she continued.

Oblivicorn snorted again, before letting out a low pitched whine.

This seemed to infuriate Selkid, whose face scrunched and almost turned red. "SEL!? Selkid! Sel, kid!"

Oblivicorn rolled her eyes and snorted once again. Whatever Oblivicorn had said, it seemed that it had angered Selkid royally, given that the Water and Fairy-type Pokemon fired a Water Pulse at Oblivicorn's face.

"Selkid... !" Serena shouted.

Of course, such an attack wouldn't be left unanswered, as Oblivicorn, her yellow eyes looking as if they were bloodshot with rage, fired yet another Charge Beam. Selkid seemed to expect a counterattack, as the Sea Nymph Pokemon jumped aside, letting the electric bolt hit the grass instead.

"Del!" Delphox said, wand ignited and ready to battle.

"Pan, pancham!" Pancham cried, jumping forward.

"Sel, selkid!" Selkid shouted at them.

Delphox and Pancham looked surprised by Selkid's reaction. They looked at each other, before taking a step back.

"Selkid...? Do you want to fight Oblivicorn alone?" Serena asked. Her first Tandorian Pokemon nodded, her face full of resolve. "Very well. Let's hope you can make Oblivicorn see reason. Or maybe she'll calm down once she spends some energy battling."

Oblivicorn stomped her hoof on the ground twice, before letting out a loud neigh. Serena could tell that the violent equine wasn't planning on pulling any proverbial punches. The rest of the Pokemon moved back in order to make room for Selkid.

As Oblivicorn's body began to crackle with black sparks, she let out another loud neigh and blitzed towards Selkid, moving so fast, she was almost impossible to see, while leaving a trail of vanishing afterimages. Oblivicorn slammed into her former teammate, sending her rolling backwards. Despite the impact, Selkid took no time in jumping back to her feet.

"Selkid, use Hyper-Voice!" Serena commanded.

"SeeeeeeeelKIIIIIIIIID!" Selkid shouted, making Oblivicorn flinch as the powerful sonic waves washed upon her.

Oblivicorn neighed angrily, and waved her frontal horn, which was glowing with a pink light. A pink, sparkly wind blew towards the Sea Nymph Pokemon.

"Quickly Selkid, counter with Ice Beam!" Serena ordered.

Selkid opened her mouth, and fired a white beam of freezing power. Both attacks clashed in the middle, resulting in an explosion that produced a cloud of pink and white. However, before Serena had a chance to issue another order, Oblivicorn came out of the cloud, fast as lightning, and violently slammed against Selkid, sending her rolling backwards a second time.

"Selkid!" Serena cried.

But once again, Selkid got back on her feet, and shot Oblivicorn a stare full of reproof and resolve. Oblivicorn snorted, and dashed forward, her hooves glowing with a white light.

"That's Double Kick! Quickly, jump back to dodge!" Serena warned.

Selkid didn't need to be told twice, as the Sea Nymph Pokemon began to jump as far as her stubby legs allowed her to, avoiding the violent stomps of Oblivicorn's hooves, which left a small circle-shaped mark on the grassy ground any time they slammed against it.

"And now Water Pulse!" Serena shouted.

As Selkid jumped to avoid another powerful kick, she formed an orb of water between her hands, and launched it at Oblivicorn. The watery missile slammed against her face, leaving it completely drenched for a second time.

Neighing in anger, Oblivicorn charged once again towards Selkid as she landed back, her front horn glowing with a white light. Selkid was unable to dodge in time, and the Sea Nymph Pokemon took the Horn Attack in full.

"Seeeeeeeel!" Selkid cried in pain, as she was knocked backwards, making Serena gasp in horror, before covering her mouth with her hands.

"Selkid, please stop!" Serena pleaded. "You're only getting hurt!"

She didn't want to openly discourage her Pokemon, but Oblivicorn was both strong and didn't care how much she hurt her opponent, so Serena didn't have much hopes about Selkid overpowering the violent equine. But Selkid had no intention to stop. As she watched the Water and Fairy-type Pokemon getting back to her feet once again, Serena knew that Selkid would fight until the very end.

"Sel, selkid, kid, sel!" Selkid shouted at Oblivicorn.

Oblivicorn replied with a mocking snort, and stomped her hoof on the ground once.

"SELKID!" Selkid defiantly yelled.

Then, there was a crackling sound, and her entire body began to glow with a bright, blueish-white light.

"Selkid...?" Serena asked, while the rest of her Pokemon gasped in surprise. Even Oblivicorn seemed surprised.

The honey blonde watched in awe how the Sea Nymph Pokemon began to grow in size, from barely reaching her knees, to being taller than she was. Her thin, streamlined body became thicker and more defined, while her tiny arms became larger, and grew hands at the end of them, and her head grew something that resembled hair.

"SYREN!" the newly evolved Pokemon cried, her tone being deeper than that of Selkid's.

"Selkid, you... you evolved!" Serena said, a little shocked. She quickly pulled out her Pokedex in order to see what had Selkid evolved into:

"Syrentide, the Siren Pokemon, and Selkid's evolved form. Water/Fairy. Their song is hypnotic, and all who hear it are immobilized. Legends tell of shipwrecks that were caused when the sailors were captivated by a Syrentide's song." The Pokedex explained.

Syrentide was a large Pokemon that looked like a mermaid. Her body was mostly dark blue, with lighter blue patterns that looked like ocean waves, and had two thick arms ending in dark blue hands with three fingers each. Her belly was white, and so was her face, which had four protrusions, two at each of its upper sides, and had a golden collar around her neck. She had two large black eyes, with two blue streaks under them, a mane of hair that looked like a running waterfall, and a trident-like golden hairpiece on her forehead, and another golden trident-like piece at the end of her tail, from which two small fins came out.

"Sy, syren!" Syrentide cried at Oblivicorn.

The Dark Horse Pokemon looked taken aback at first, but she didn't relent, and fixed Syrentide with a chilling glare. Letting out a loud neigh, Oblivicorn blitzed towards Syrentide, slamming into her before she had any chance to dodge.

"Sy!"

However, unlike last time, Syrentide's large size and bulk allowed her to resist the hit much better. The attack made her skid backwards, but she held her ground.

"Well done, Syrentide! Now let's show her again your Hyper-Voice!" Serena cheered.

"SyyyyyyREN!" Syrentide yelled, sending a sonic wave so powerful, it blasted Oblivicorn backwards.

"Pokeball, go!" Serena said, before tossing an empty pokeball at the rogue Oblivicorn.

Oblivicorn was turned into pure energy, and was sucked inside the capture device the moment the object hit him, before dropping to the ground. It shook once. Then twice.

"Come on... !"

Before the pokeball broke open, releasing Oblivicorn. The equine's face was a mask of fury, and her yellow eyes glinted with so much anger, they almost looked like burning coals.

"So, it wasn't enough. You just don't want to come back, do you? Guess we'll have to show you how much I'm willing to keep fighting," Serena said, as she touched the keystone on her ring. She knew that attempting Mega Evolution was risky. But out of the wild Selkid only evolved into Syrentide when they formed a strong bond with their trainer, so in theory, there shouldn't be any problems with Mega Evolution. "Come on Syrentide, let me help you bring out the potential that hides deep within you! Mega Evolve!"

Beams of light shot from the Keystone on her ring and the Mega Stone tied to Syrentide's tail, triggering the second transformation in a row, ending with the Mega Evolution helix flashing in front of her for a second.

Mega Syrentide was a sight to behold. She was even larger than before, her whole body being now deep blue, as if wearing a long, regal gown. The protrusions at the side of her face had elongated into wing-like appendages, and the trident-like headpiece on her forehead had now five prongs instead of three, almost looking like a crown, with her hair becoming longer and lusher. Her golden collar was now a golden chestpiece, with two wing-like protrusions coming out of her shoulders. Her tail was now longer, with two long pink fins running up its sides. The tail-fin at the end is larger and fancier, pink-colored, and has a larger trident attached to it, with the middle prong ending in a point and the side prongs ending in spirals.

Even Oblivicorn seemed a little worried, since she didn't look so sure of victory anymore. Still, it showed that, just like Serena, the Dark Horse Pokemon refused to give up either, as she fired a powerful Charge Beam at Syrentide.

"Water Pulse!"

"Sy!"

The sphere of water formed between Syrentide's hands was noticeably larger than before. Once the projectile was launched, it plowed through the electric bolt coming out of Oblivicorn's horn, before it slammed against her face, resulting in a large watery explosion.

"The power of Mega Evolution is simply breathtaking... a power born of the bond between trainer and Pokemon, twice over in this case. Don't worry Oblivicorn, I don't know what happened, but I shall fix our bond!" Serena resolutely thought. "Another one!"

Syrentide launched another orb of water at Oblivicorn, but this time, the mare was ready. Using that speed-based attack, Oblivicorn dodged the blue sphere and smashed her body against Syrentide. Before the Mega Evolved Pokemon could react, the Dark and Fairy-type Pokemon dashed out of range once again, and began to to run circles around Syrentide, in an attempt to confuse her.

"Oblivicorn's fighting is becoming more erratic. The anger and confusion she must be feeling is affecting her head... I need to end this." Serena deduced, shaking her head. "Syrentide, Ice Beam on the ground in front of you!"

Syrentide did as she was ordered, the attack covering the ground in a sheet of ice. The results were instant: given her speed, Oblivicorn was unable to break in time, and the slippery ice made her lose her balance and fall headfirst into the ground with a painful whine.

"Now, Syrentide, Hyper-Voice!" Serena shouted.

A pink glowing outline appeared around Syrentide, before the Siren Pokemon unleashed a devastating sonic scream against her opponent. The powerful attack blasted the rogue equine backwards, tearing the grass apart and blowing powerful gusts of wind that forced Serena and her other Pokemon to shield their faces. Serena could also see that this Hyper-Voice was pink instead of colorless for some reason. Perhaps it had something to do with her Mega Evolved form?

One way or another, Oblivicorn wasn't going to get up from such a strong blow.

"Please Oblivicorn, don't fight anymore," Serena pleaded, as she pulled out another empty pokeball. "Pokeball, go!"

The pokeball hit Oblivicorn, opening up as the Dark Horse Pokemon was turned into pure energy and sucked inside, before the ball closed and fell to the ground.

One shake.

Two shakes.

Three shakes.

"Please, don't..."

A ding, followed by a small burst of star-shaped sparkles that quickly faded away.

Serena let out a huge sigh of relief. The rest of her Pokemon did the same, while Syrentide reverted back to her normal form, and plopped on the ground.

"Great job, Syrentide," Serena said, patting the exhausted Water and Fairy-type on her head.

"Syre..." she nodded in appreciation.

After that, Serena walked towards the pokeball, and picked it up. While the mood was overall of sadness, she allowed herself to smile.

"You put up such a huge fight, Oblivicorn... but I will never give up on anyone, not even my Pokemon," she said, gripping the ball with determination. "I will learn what caused you to act this way, and I'll help you out no matter what. I don't mind how much time it will take."

Because deep down, she knew that she would never be able to become Kalos Queen until she did so.

...

The way back to the camp took more time than she thought, given how fast she had caught up to Oblivicorn when she ran away.

The first thing she did was to send a message to Ash reassuring her that Oblivicorn had been recaptured, the rest of her Pokemon were

okay -and that Selkid had evolved- and that they were coming back to the camp.

On the way back, Serena pulled out her Pokedex, and used the time she now had to check a few things she had seen during the battle.

Turns out Oblivicorn's speed-based attack was a Dark-type move called Sudden Strike, which was similar to Quick Attack and Aqua Jet. And the reason Syrentide's Hyper-Voice had taken on a pink color was due her ability upon Mega Evolving, Pixilate, which converted Normal-type moves into Fairy-types on top of giving them a boost.

After some time, she finally returned to the camp. Upon being seen, her friends quickly ran towards her.

"Hey Serena!" Ash shouted.

"How did it go?" Clemont asked. "I know you said you got Oblivicorn back, but how did you do it?"

"Is that Selkid's evolution?" Bonnie asked. "She looks so cool and beautiful!"

"S-Syren..." Syrentide blushed at the compliment.

"Guys, I appreciate your concern, but can we leave the questions for tomorrow?" Serena asked, trying to sound as polite as possible.

"Getting Oblivicorn back... both my Pokemon and I are exhausted, and wish for nothing more than rest now."

"Of course," Ash said in an understanding manner. "If that's what you want, we won't bother you."

No more words were spoken.

Serena didn't do anything else nor spoke with anybody other than her Pokemon for the rest of the day. She didn't feel like talking to anyone now.

Not only two of her Pokemon had evolved, but she had used Mega Evolution for the first time ever. Such a day should be remembered as one of the best of her career as a Pokemon trainer, yet it was anything but.

Still, the sour memories created today would be easy to cast away if she could find what made Oblivicorn react the way she did, and how to fix it. Would she be able to do it? Serena wasn't sure.

What she was sure of is that she wouldn't give up until the end.

...

Author's Note: Bet you thought that after the previous chapter, this was going to be a more relaxed romp, didn't you? Nope! It's Serena Suffering Time!

There were some of you who wondered if Minicorn would evolve to either Kiricorn or Oblivicorn, and after mulling over it, I finally decided for the latter. I liked the idea of Serena having a Pokemon that's not only not cute or cuddly, but it's downright terrifying, as a way to shake up her team a little. Plus, I don't think Serena needed a second Pokemon capable of Mega Evolving, plus another advantage I'm pretty sure some of you can imagine. Though, before you ask, no, this isn't a Charizard situation; there IS a reason behind Oblivicorn lashing out against Serena shortly after evolving, despite the fact that she evolved by her own choice. It will be explained in a future chapter.

And Minicorn evolving into Oblivicorn isn't the only change among Serena's Pokemon, since after much buildup Selkid finally evolved into Syrentide (she had reached the friendship requirement sometime ago, but she needed something to push her into evolving) which allowed Serena to access Mega Evolution for the first time. Too bad her Mega debut was against one of her own Pokemon.

Though, if you aren't looking forward to this development, worry not, because just like the Sylveon's Phobia arc, the Oblivicorn's Disobedience arc won't last so long that it overstays its welcome.

Thanks a lot to TheDoctor1998, MegaSalamence64, Jake, Fox McCloud, Hirowriter and Viroro-kun for reviewing last chapter, and special thanks to Viroro-kun for betareading this chapter, whose edits and suggestions make it so much better.

Next chapter, our heroes progress their journey towards Amatree Town as they cross the perilous Baikal Rainforest, where Serena's Quetzoral originated. Some of her past will be revealed, and there will be another big change to Serena's Pokemon team. In the meantime, don't forget to drop a review with your thoughts on this chapter!

The King of the Jungle

Chapter 40:

The King of the Jungle

Lilycove City

Today Ash had received a really nice surprise.

He was in Lilycove City, doing... something. He didn't remember exactly what, but for some reason he didn't feel like that was important. Anyway, he had seen an advertisement of a contest taking part in the city today, so he decided to go and see it, given he had the time, plus the mention of contests gave him a feeling of nostalgia slowly bubbling inside him that he felt he could indulge. He hadn't seen a contest since the Sinnoh Grand Festival, after all.

The appeal round began, and imagine his surprise when the name of Serena was announced as one of the coordinators!

Of course, Serena was amazing, using Delphox and Sylveon to make a stunning show of light and flames. Once she was done, he went to talk with her to the coordinator's waiting area. Serena seemed to be just as happy to see him as she was to see her, but she didn't want to talk just now, since she wanted to focus on the contest.

"Once the contest is over, meet me at the entrance of the Contest Hall," Serena said, smiling warmly at him. "There's something very important that I need to tell you..."

Even if he wanted to catch up with her right now, Ash decided to honor her wishes, so after wishing her luck, he returned to the audience.

Needless to say, Serena was among those who passed to the second part of the contest, the Contest Battles. Serena used Delphox and Pancham, the two Pokemon fighting with resolve and skill, defeating one opponent after the other, until there were no more, and Serena was declared the winner of the contest, much to Ash's joy.

Once the contest was over, Ash quickly went to the entrance, and patiently waited.

It had been so long since they last saw each other, since the two of them left Kalos to pursue their own dreams. And it seemed that Serena was doing pretty good on her contests, if what Ash had seen here was any indication.

" Sorry if I made you wait too much," Serena's voice said, as she exited the building.

Serena had changed quite a bit since they parted ways. She was now wearing a dark gray sleeveless sweater, a white and black plaid skirt, brown knee-high boots with black stocking, and a dark gray fedora. Her hair had grown a little, and had styled it in a way that her ears, which had bowtie-shaped red earrings on them, were now visible.

Ash couldn't tell if it was the change of look or something else, but Serena looked less like a girl and more like a young woman now.

And she looked prettier than ever.

" Oh, not in the slightest. Given how long it has been since we last saw each other, I wouldn't have minded if you made me wait more," Ash excitedly said. "Come on, let's go somewhere else to talk. Maybe we could have dinner together at the Pokemon Center?"

Serena shook her head. "It won't be necessary to go anywhere Ash. I can say everything I want to tell you here."

Ash raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure? Well, if that's what you want..."

" Trust me, this won't take long. First of all," Serena said as she began to fish for something inside her backpack, before handing it to Ash. "I wanted to give you this."

Ash took the object Serena was giving him, a small, square box that for some reason, felt oddly familiar to him. Opening the box, Ash saw the ribbon he had given Serena back in Coumarine City, neatly furled back into a roll.

The boy looked at Serena with a confused expression. "Serena, this is the blue ribbon I gave you. Why are you returning it back to me? Don't you want it anymore?"

" I used to cherish that ribbon a lot in the past, given that it was a gift from you. In a way, I believed that as long as I wore it, I'd be connected to you," Serena began to explain.

Ash didn't like where this was going. "Then why are you-"

" -giving it back?" Serena finished, smiling in a very unnerving way. "Because I'm over you, Ash. We had a fun time together, I'm not going to deny it, but I've moved on. You're now my past, Ash. Consider this a definite goodbye."

Ash felt as if somebody had poured a bucket of cold water over his head. Blinking in confusion, he asked: "Definite goodbye? W-Why are you saying this, Serena? You don't want to see me again? Did our friendship mean so little to you?"

" Like I said, I will always have the memories of our journey through Kalos together. But memories shouldn't get in the way of the future. In fact," Serena said as she snapped her fingers. "There's somebody I want you to meet."

That moment, somebody joined them: a pale skinned, black haired boy that appeared to be a couple years older than them and, for some reason, was wearing near-identical clothes to the ones Ash wore during his journey through Kalos.

" You told him what you wanted to say, babe?" the boy asked.

" Indeed," Serena nodded, before turning to Ash. "Ash, this is Calem. My boyfriend."

If those words felt like cold daggers stabbing inside his heart, Serena pulling Calem into a deep, passionate kiss made Ash feel as if his heart had been swallowed by a black hole.

" S-Serena...?" Ash stammered, his voice as weak and soft as a whisper.

" Oh, by the way," Serena said, after breaking the kiss with Calem. She then walked towards Ash, and violently thrust her hand into his chest, before, with a wet squelching noise, pulling his still beating heart out of his body. "I don't think you'll be needing this anymore."

Serena then casually tossed Ash's heart into a nearby trash can, as she and Calem continued to passionately kiss.

" No... no... no... NOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

...

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" Ash caught himself shouting.

Blinking, Ash realized he was no longer in Lilycove City, but inside the tent he shared with Clemont. Looking to the side, he saw the inventor still sleeping. Thankfully his shout hadn't woken him up.

"Pika...?"

However, it seemed that his shout had woken Pikachu up, who drowsily looked at Ash, his eyes reflecting worry.

Ash smiled, picked up his starter Pokemon, and began to gently pet his back. "Don't worry buddy, it was just a nightmare. I'm okay."

He continued petting Pikachu, until a realization dawned upon him.

A nightmare?

Did the idea of Serena having a boyfriend other than him fill him with so much dread as to consider it a scenario worthy of being called a nightmare?

Ash sighed and looked at the time in his pokegear. It was a little before six in the morning. While they didn't get up so early, Ash didn't feel like he would be able to fall asleep again. Gently placing Pikachu next to his cushion- since the rodent could indeed sleep some more- Ash quietly got dressed and got out of the tent.

Once he stepped out, he was greeted by a sight of green as far as the eye could see, warm temperature and very humid air, the latter two quickly making him feel sweaty.

Such was Route 10, also named Baykal Forest: a dense rainforest that had its own microclimate outside of the rest of Tandor, and something they had to cross if they wanted to reach their next destination, Amatee Town.

The terrain, dense vegetation, and territorial Pokemon turned the place into possibly the hardest route to traverse in all of West Tandor. Still, there were many people who dared to cross it in order to reach Amatee, given that Tiko, the Amatee Gym Leader, was famed for being West Tandor's strongest Gym Leader. And the flux of trainers traveling to the town also increased since they built a Contest Hall.

Ash and his friends had been trekking through the dense jungle for a whole day. The lush vegetation and lack of clear paths made their progress quite difficult. Still, at their current pace, they believed they would arrive at Amatee with at least one day to spare.

"Oh hey, I wasn't expecting somebody to be up so early," a voice said.

Ash saw Serena returning to the camp, carrying a basket full of berries that Ash had never seen before. Next to her was Pancham, also carrying a smaller basket of berries, and hovering above both was Quetzoral.

"I had a nightmare, and I don't feel like I could go back to sleep," Ash told her.

"A nightmare? What kind of nightmare?" Serena asked, slightly worried.

"Eh... I kinda forgot about it," Ash lied, scratching his cheek. "It wasn't important. By the way Serena, once we're in Amatree and the contest is over, would you like to go on another date?"

Serena raised both eyebrows, seemingly surprised by how suddenly and brazenly Ash had asked for it. But Ash had the irrational gut feeling that, if he didn't ask her now, somebody else would come and take her away.

"Eh, of course, I'd love to!" Serena said, smiling happily.

"Great," Ash said, now feeling a little better, the memory of the nightmare no longer bothering him. He then noticed the baskets Serena and Pancham were carrying. "What about you? Did you get up to go pick some berries?"

"Pretty much, yeah. Mostly because the berries that grow here can't be found in any other part of the world," Serena explained, as she and Pancham left the baskets next to her tent.

"Really?"

Serena nodded. "According to this website I read, Baykal Forest has many berry trees that not only do produce unique berries, but they

grow ten times faster than most other berries!"

"Whoa, that's amazing!" Ash said. "Maybe we could take some of these berries back home and plant them there. It would make feeding Pokemon so much easier!"

"Sadly, these berry trees can't grow outside Baykal. Something about the place's unique climatological condition," Serena explained, as Ash deflated upon seeing his idea shot down. "That's why people in Amaree chose this place to settle. Food is extremely abundant, and they make a lot of money exporting it to the rest of the region."

"I see. Oh well, I'm sure the Pokemon will love the pokepuffs you'll make with these berries," Ash said.

"I know, that's why Quetzal volunteered to guide me to those trees, given that this is where she was born," Serena said, motioning to the Canopy Pokemon, still hovering above them. "And Pancham here was awake and wanted to tag along and help us."

"Pan, pancham!" Pancham nodded.

"Your Pokemon know no one makes better pokepuffs!" Ash said.

"Hehe, I'm sure they do," Serena said, as her eyes went to the spot where Delphox, Sylveon and Syrentide slept. Ash could notice how her shoulders slumped and her body sagged when her eyes moved a little further away, to the spot where Oblivicorn slept alone.

Thankfully, after being recaptured, Oblivicorn hadn't tried to escape a second time. Still, she not only refused to listen to Serena, but even avoided the rest of her Pokemon as well. Serena even attempted to use the PST to understand what was bothering her, but Oblivicorn remained silent when she tried that.

"If only it was as easy as to make her a treat tasty enough..." Ash heard Serena whisper to herself.

"Don't worry Serena. Sooner or later, she'll open up to you," Ash reassured her, as he put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"I hope so. Still, I'm not going to stop reminding her that I will always be there for her, no matter what," Serena said.

"Chico!" a new but familiar voice cried.

Everybody turned to the source of the voice, and saw not one, but three Chicoatl emerging from the nearby shrubbery, cautiously walking towards the group.

"Que, tzo, que!" Quetzoral happily cawed, as she dived towards the trio of Chicoatl.

"Chi, chico!" The three Chicoatl cawed just as happily returned, and the four of them began to excitedly talk among each other.

"Whoa, look at that. It looks like Quetzoral knew some friends from here," Ash said, noticing how happy she was to meet with her own kind.

"I remember Vaeryn telling me that Chicoatl hail from this part of the region, so it's only natural that we'd run into some of them," Serena told him.

"Yet we found her on the Baa Grasslands," Ash said. "Singing to that crowd of forest Pokemon."

Serena's brow scrunched a little, as placed a finger under her chin. "You're right... what made her leave her home?"

"Well, we can always ask her. We have the Pokemon Speech Translator," Ash suggested.

"Good idea. If Quetzoral left this place, it must have been for a reason, and maybe she doesn't feel comfortable returning," Serena deduced, before her shoulders sagged a little. "Oh boy, I can't believe I didn't think of that before coming here!"

"Hey, don't worry that much. If anything, Quetzoral hasn't shown any signs that she doesn't want to stay here," Ash said, looking at Quetzoral, who was now introducing Pancham to the trio of Chicoatl. Pancham, extroverted as ever, took no time to quickly endear to them. "If anything, she seems rather happy to be back."

Serena looked at Quetzoral, who didn't seem distraught in the slightest, behaving no different than before they arrived.

Still, better safe than sorry.

"Ash, can you fetch me the PST, please?" Serena asked.

"Sure thing!" Ash replied, as the boy returned to the tent he shared with Clemont. Less than a minute later, the teen boy returned with the translating device, who handed it to Serena. Once it was in her possession, the honey blonde walked to where her Pokemon were conversing with the local Chicoatl.

"Hey there, you guys," Serena tried to get in their conversation as gently as possible. "Say, aren't you going to introduce me to your friends?"

"Que, tzoral, que, quetzoral!" Quetzoral whistled. [Of course! Guys, this is Serena, my trainer! These three Chicoatl are members of my former flock!]

"Chi!" [Nice to meet you!]

"Co, coatl!" [Ohhhh, a human!]

"Chico!" [I'm hungry!]

"Nice to meet you too," Serena said. She then turned towards Quetzoral. "So, they're like your friends and family?"

"Que!" Quetzoral replied. [Pretty much!]

"I see. Though, this may not be my place to ask, but given where we found you, why did you leave your home and family and go to the Baa Grasslands?"

Despite knowing it would be a delicate issue, she immediately regretted making that question upon noticing the Quetzoral's mood grew somber.

"Sorry. If you don't want to answer that question, please pretend I didn't say anything," Serena quickly added.

But Quetzoral shook her head. "Quet, que, tzo, tzoral, quet," she began. [Primeape and Mankey here are very territorial. A few days before you found me, I ate without realizing a berry from a bush that was in their territory. A bunch of Primeape saw me and beat me up, and threatened to do even worse things to me if they saw me again. I was so scared that I left the jungle altogether.]

There was a moment of heavy silence as everybody processed what Quetzoral had said. Soon, anger and indignation fell upon everybody else, both human and Pokemon alike.

"What a bunch of bullies!" Ash said. "If we ever meet them, I'll have a few words with them!"

"Pan, cham, pancham!" Pancham proudly said, as he punched into his open paw. [If we ever met them, I'll beat them up senseless for what they did to you!]

"And... you were okay returning here?" Serena tentatively asked.

"Que, tzoral, quetz!" she happily cawed. [Don't worry! With how strong I got under your training, I'm no longer afraid of running into them again! And if that's not enough, I have the rest of my friends to help me!]

"Chan, pancham!" Pancham agreed. [Damn right you do!]

Serena let out a sigh of relief. "Well, I'm glad that coming here wasn't a problem for you after all. Still, I'll keep this in mind to make sure I don't make such a potential mistake."

Quetzoral merely nodded.

...

A few hours later, once Clemont and Bonnie got up -and once Ash and Serena had to endure some teasing from Bonnie about why the two of them decided to get up so early- they packed up their camp and continued their trend through the jungle.

Guiding them was Quetzoral. Given what they had learned from the local Primeape, they didn't want to anger them by getting inside their territory, so Serena had the Canopy Pokemon out in order to guide them so they wouldn't cross into the irascible Pokemon's territory.

"Quet, quetzo!" Quetzoral said. [Alright, we're going well. As long as we keep our distance from that cluster of tall trees, we're good!]

"Heh, it's so nice that Serena got a Pokemon from this place! This beats following a GPS!" Bonnie stated, looking at the Canopy Pokemon with admiration.

"And she isn't the only one," Clemont pointed out. "Maybe if we travel through the northern part of East Tandor, Ash's Frosulo might act as a guide as well, given that he hails from there."

"Hey, you're right!" Ash said in realization. "Man, I can believe I didn't realize that..."

"Pika..." Pikachu said, as he patted Ash on the head. Then, his expression grew concerned while his ears perked up. "Pi, pikachu!"

"Huh? Something wrong, buddy?" Ash asked.

Before Pikachu could have a chance to repeat what he said within the PST's range, there were several noises of vegetation rustling,

before a bunch of angry looking Mankey and Primeape appeared. They didn't look very friendly.

"What the...?" Clemont asked, before looking at the . "Didn't Quetzoral say that we aren't crossing their territory?"

"Prim, prime, primeape!" one of the Primeape angrily screeched, loud enough for the PST to catch what it said. [You're crossing our lands now, intruders! You better turn back, or suffer the wrath of our fists!]

"Que? Quet, quezt, ral!" Quetzoral protested. [What? That's nonsense! I know these lands and they don't belong to your kind!]

"Prim, pri, ape!" Primeape growled. [They do now! So leave this place!]

"Listen, we don't want any trouble. We only want to reach Amatree Town. If you just let us pass-" Ash tried to reason.

"Pri! Ape, pri!" [NO! Turn around! Last warning!"]

"Maybe we should listen to them and find another path..." Clemont suggested, as he began looking around. More Mankey and Primeape were arriving at the scene, and none of them looked friendly or welcoming in the slightest.

"If we do that, we might not arrive in time for Serena's contest," Ash rebuked. "Plus, if they keep claiming new land as theirs, then the whole jungle will become their territory. Should we avoid it entirely? Because this is the only way to reach Amatree."

Before anyone could say another word, one of Serena's pokeballs opened on its own, and much to the honey blonde's surprise, Pancham emerged from it.

"Pancham...?" Serena asked in confusion. The Vaniville Town girl never remembered Pancham getting out of his pokeball without her

asking him to do so.

"Pan, pancham, chan pan!" Pancham snarled, shaking his clenched paw. [Oh, Quetzoral told me about you jerks! I was secretly wishing we ran into you!]

Pancham's sudden appearance had the same effect as lighting a match on a room full of gunpowder, as all the Mankey and Primeape's faces contorted in fury at the Playful Pokemon's show of disrespect towards them. "PRIM? PRIMEAPE!" [YOU DARE SPEAK TO ME IN SUCH AN INSULTING WAY?! TEACH THEM A LESSON!]

The moment the Primeape ringleader screeched, a multitude of its kind and its pre-evolved form emerged from around both under the shrubbery and above the jungle canopy, quickly surrounding the group.

Ash sighed. "I wish it didn't have to come up to this. Aveden, Raptorch, I choose you!"

Clemont sighed in resignation, as he also picked two pokeballs. "Battle is it, then. Eletux, Nucleon, go! Bonnie, stay next to me!"

Thankfully for the inventor, his little sister didn't protest and did as she was told.

Aveden and Raptorch materialized next to Ash, quickly followed by Nucleon and Eletux.

That moment, the horde of Pig Monkey Pokemon attacked. As they launched towards the humans' Pokemon, either their arms or legs glowed with a white light, signaling an incoming fighting type attack.

"Aveden, Gust! As big as you can make it!" Ash ordered.

"Av, ave, ave!" Aveden whistled, as he began to furiously beat his wings, raising a powerful wind that if it didn't stop the Mankey and the Primeape on their tracks, it slowed them down considerably.

"And now Raptorch, Flamethrower! Make a wide arc!" Ash commanded.

"Rap, raptorch!" Raptorch happily yipped, before taking a deep breath and releasing a powerful stream of flames from his jaws.

Raptorch's fire attack was amplified by Aveden's Gust, which turned what it was intended as a stream of flames into a blazing torrent, burning the Pig Monkey Pokemon and setting some nearby plants on fire, making several Mankey and Primeape screech in pain.

Seeing that a charge wasn't going anywhere, a pair of Primeape decided to try a ranged attack. Slamming their paws into the ground, they summoned twin rows of rising stone pillars towards the alleged intruders.

"Our turn! Nucleon, destroy those rocks with Gamma Ray!" Clemont ordered.

"Nu, nucleon!" Nucleon cried as the green gemstone on his chest began to glow with an eerie emerald light, before firing a beam of the same color.

The beam tore through one of the rows of pillars as if they were made of fragile sandstone, before directing the Nuclear-type attack to the other one, which met the same result. This gave the pair of Primeape enough surprise to overpower their near constant rage, as they gave an eye take as they took an involuntary step backwards.

"Time to show them your new attack, Eletux! Thunderbolt!" Clemont shouted.

"Elee... !" Eletux began, as the bulbs on his rear began to glow with an electric yellow glow. "TUUUUUUX!"

The electricity stored inside his bulbs was released in the form of a powerful electrical blast that zapped the pair of Primeape.

"Clemont, above you! Watch out!" Serena shouted.

"Huh?" Clemont looked upwards, and saw a Mankey and a Primeape descending upon him, dropping from the forest canopy above them. The latter had both fists on fire, the former with one of its paws coated in a sickly purple aura, attacks that could be easily identified as Fire Punch and Poison Jab. "AAAAH!"

The inventor screamed as he jumped forward, while Bonnie tried to jump in the different direction, the two siblings narrowly avoided the attacks, which smashed against the ground instead.

"Quetzoral, Drill Peck at that Primeape! And Pancham, Thunder Punch!" Serena ordered.

Pancham leaped towards the attacking duo -while making a pair of somersaults mid air- before smashing his electrified fist against the Mankey's face, while Quetzoral's glowing, spinning beak slammed against the Primeape.

"Well done!^a" Serena praised her Pokemon.

The battle kept going on for several minutes, but the Mankey and the Primeape were barely able to land a hit on the alleged trespassers. Despite their superior numbers, the Mankey and Primeape's attack was disorganized and chaotic, the constant anger that fueled their species failing to translate into an advantage in battle, given that it didn't allow them to come up with attack strategies more complex than 'rush forward and pound everything in my way into submission', and were unable to make a dent on the solid defense the three trainers and their Pokemon had mounted. Soon, several Mankey began to run away, which was quickly followed by the Primeape.

"They're running away!" Serena said.

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu cheered as well.

"Hope they learned a lesson about what happens when you try to bully and attack everyone that crosses your path," Ash said with a nod, before turning towards the Lumiose siblings. "Clemont, Bonnie, are you alright? That Mankey and Primeape almost got you guys there."

"A few scraps, but nothing to worry about," Clemont said, wiping some dust and blades of grass from his overalls. "Bonnie?"

"I'm fine too," she stated. "How about you, Dedenne?" However, when she looked at her bag, it was empty. "Dedenne?" She began to look around, but there was no trace of the small rodent. "Dedenne!? Where are you? Dedenne!"

But Dedenne didn't reply.

Soon panic began to settle as the three teenagers began to frantically look around, but the Antennae Pokemon was nowhere to be seen.

"Where did he go...?" Clemont asked, before looking at Bonnie. "He was with you the whole time, right?"

"Yes! I kept him close to me as long as the battle lasted! I only lost sight of- oh..." Bonnie said in realization.

"Oh?" Ash repeated.

"When that Mankey-Primeape pair attacked my big brother and I, I had to jump and fell to the ground..." Bonnie said, her worry growing with each passing moment. "... I was so focused on getting away from that pair of bullies, I didn't notice if Dedenne was still with me or not..."

Clemont sighed dejectedly. "It's possible that Dedenne fell from the bag when you jumped," Clemont surmised. "And seeing the battle going on, he was scared and ran away."

"R-Ran away? B-But..." Bonnie stammered, as he began to look around. "Then Dedenne is in danger! We must find him! What if he runs into more of those Mankey? Or something even worse!?"

"But this jungle is so big, and Dedenne could be anywhere. We don't even know in what direction he went..." Serena said, looking around her, as if trying to guess the most probable route the runaway Pokemon might have taken.

"Pi, pikapi!" Pikachu cried, drawing everybody's attention, as he began to gather electricity, sparks flying from his cheeks.

"Pikachu, what are you doing!? Nurse Joy said you can't use electric attacks!" A worried Ash said, trying to make him stop.

"No, wait! Pikachu and Dedenne can communicate through electricity and use it to find each other if they're separated!" Clemont said in realization, smacking a fist against his open palm in a vertical motion. "They have done it in the past, remember?"

"Pikapi!" Pikachu nodded, happy that somebody caught his intention.

Ash didn't protest, but looked at his starter with apprehension. "I see. Though, you better not hurt yourself, okay?"

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu nodded, and continued gathering tiny amounts of electricity, before sending them outwards in the form of electrical pulses. After a few seconds of doing so, it seemed Pikachu finally got a response. "Pika!"

"You found Dedenne?" Bonnie asked, while Serena moved the PST close to him.

"Pi, pikachu pi!" Pikachu nodded, before pointing a paw to the north. [Yes! I sensed his presence in that direction! I told him to find a shelter and wait for us to pick him up!]

"Great! In that case, let's not waste more time! Lead the way, Pikachu!" Ash told him.

As they retrieved their Pokemon, the group followed Pikachu's lead to the north. Thankfully, no more overly territorial Pokemon got in their way. Every minute or so Pikachu would stop in order to send an electric pulse and keep track of Dedenne's position. Dedenne had been moving as well, probably running away from potential threats, until, according to Pikachu, he found shelter in a nearby cave.

"Let's hope that that cave isn't the home of another Pokemon," Clemont said. "Because after seeing those Primeape..."

"Then let's get Dedenne back before the owner of that cave is back," Ash replied.

As they continued their trek through the jungle at a quick pace -with Clemont struggling to keep up, but given the situation he wasn't complaining- they ran into something none of them were expecting to find in the middle of a place like that.

A sign on a post. Written in crimson red letters.

WARNING: ANTHELL

IF YOU CAN READ THIS, TURN AROUND IMMEDIATELY. THE INSECTS ARE RAVENOUS.

Needless to say, the ominous warning sign on the sign post didn't leave anyone indifferent. Ash looked at Pikachu.

"Pikachu...?" Ash asked.

"Pi, chu..." Pikachu said, pointing in the same direction. [Dedenne is still in that direction...]

No more words needed to be said. Even if the group was now noticeably on edge, they weren't going to abandon Dedenne. And indeed, after a few more minutes of walking, they reached the

entrance of a cave on the face of a steep cliff. The cave entrance was perfectly round, with many mushrooms growing around it, and cobwebs on its roof.

"So, that's where Dedenne is," Serena grimly said. "The Anthell."

"It's so dark inside..." Bonnie said, trying to peer through the dense darkness.

"Clemont?" Ash asked.

The inventor nodded, and after pressing a hidden button, the Heliolisk Lantern came out of his backpack, projecting a powerful beam of light inside the cave, allowing them to see what was inside.

"Alright, let's go in," Ash said, taking the lead. "Stay close to each other, try to move quickly, but don't make any sound. We don't know what Pokemon might be there."

Nodding the group of four, plus Pikachu, entered the Anthell.

Thankfully, Pikachu assured them that Dedenne was nearby, which hopefully would make this rescue trip a short one. The Heliolisk Lantern illuminated the cave, revealing many fungi growing on the ground, cobwebs everywhere, and silk cocoons of varying sizes stuck on the walls and the ceilings.

Soon they arrived at a fork in the path which split into three directions. Without hesitating, Pikachu led the group towards the one to the left.

"I don't like this place... why didn't Dedenne choose a less creepy place to hide?" Bonnie asked, hugging herself. "And it smells so bad in here!"

They couldn't help but silently agree with Bonnie. As soon as they entered the lair, the air became much stale and stagnant. There were many particles floating in the air, probably spores from the fungi

that grew on the ground. Hopefully they wouldn't cause them breathing problems.

"This cave... it doesn't look like it's natural," Clemont began, as he looked at the walls and ceiling as if he was studying them. "I'd say that someone or something dug it."

"Something like what? A Pokemon?" Ash asked.

"It has to be a very big Pokemon then..." Serena said, shivering as the thought of what kind of Pokemon could have dug this place.

"Either a big one, or many little ones. Given the cobwebs and silky cocoons, this looks like the home of a Bug-type Pokemon," Ash said, as he pushed a cobweb out of his way. "Plus, remember that warning sign? 'The insects are ravenous'."

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu said.

"Nene?" a familiar voice squeaked in return.

Everybody looked in the direction of the voice, and saw Dedenne peeking his head from behind a large fungus.

"Dedenne!" Bonnie pretty much squealed.

"Nene!" Dedenne squeaked in joy, as he rushed towards his unofficial trainer.

Bonnie scooped her beloved Electric and Fairy-type and placed it inside his bag. "Never run away like that ever again, you hear me! You gave me such a scare... !"

"Great, we found Dedenne! Now let's turn back and leave this creepy place!" Serena urged. Not that anybody could disagree with her. "Do you guys remember where the entrance was?"

"We only took a turn to the left, so all we have to do is turn back and take the first turn to the right," Clemont said, as he and the others

turned around. However, upon turning around, they realized that they were no longer alone. "... oh."

In front of them were a trio of Smore, looking at them with curious eyes.

"So... Do you guys live here?" Bonnie asked. "Sorry for entering inside your home like that, but Dedenne got lost and we had to get him back. Don't worry, we'll be leaving now!"

The Smore, however, didn't move. Then, another pair of Smore joined the first three.

"Uh, guys? You're blocking our only exit. If you move aside a little, we'll be on our way," Ash asked, trying not to sound too worried.

Then, another pair of Pokemon joined the Smore. They looked like Smore, with the same red and black color scheme, only much bigger, with six legs instead of four, and a large abdomen ending on a nozzle with a small flame coming out of it.

"What Pokemon is that...?" Serena asked, quietly pulling out her Pokedex.

" Firoke, the Smoking Ant Pokemon, and Smore's evolution. Bug/Fire. Its belly is filled with super hot lava that it sprays at its opponent through the nozzle on its abdomen. Its aim is precise." The Pokedex explained.

They didn't find that description reassuring in the slightest.

"Listen, we're sorry again for invading your home, but if you guys let us leave, I promise you won't see us ever again," Ash reassured them. Everybody else nodded energetically.

There was a moment of silence as they waited for the insects' reaction.

"FIIIIIIIR!" the two Firoke screeched in unison as the small flame coming out of their nozzles grew in size.

"RUN!" Ash said.

They didn't have to be told. They quickly turned around and ran, as the Firoke and the Smore gave chase, pelting them with multiple Fire-type moves, such as Ember and Incinerate, flying towards them. Despite the Pokedex's description, thankfully none of the Firoke's attacks managed to hit any of them, though some of them were close.

Still, Ash decided not to take any chances.

"Greninja, I choose you!" Ash said, as he tossed the pokeball of his one Kalosian Pokemon behind him. "Greninja, block that tunnel with Ice Beam!"

"Gre!" Greninja nodded, cupping his webbed hands as an orb of chilling energy formed between them. Thrusting his hands forward, the orb's energy was released in the form of a freezing beam towards the ground, erecting a wall of ice that plugged it completely, separating them from the angry Bug-types.

"Well done, Greninja!" Ash praised. However, his joy was short lived, as the orange flashes seen from the other side of the ice wall told him that the Smore and Firoke were going to melt the improvised barrier. "Come on guys, we need to keep going! That barrier won't last long!"

"Where to? That's where we came from!" Bonnie shouted, as she hugged Dedenne protectively.

"Then we should try to see if there's another exit," Serena suggested. "But we might end up getting lost inside this place full of angry insects."

"Thankfully, there's somebody who can guide us through this!" Clemont said in realization, pokeball in hand. "Luxray, go!"

The capture device opened upon touching the ground, releasing Clemont's strongest Pokemon.

"Luxray, can you use your X-ray vision to see if there's another way to get out of this place?" Clemont almost pleaded.

"Lux, luxray!" the Gleam Eyes Pokemon dutifully nodded, as he began to look around with his glowing eyes.

Worry spiked as the Electric-type was taking more time than they expected -and more time than they really had- to find an alternative route, fearing that they might be trapped there.

"Lux, luxray, lu!" Luxray said, before Serena moved the PST towards him. [I did find another exit not too far from here. Alas, there are many Pokemon in our path. We should better prepare for battle!]

"In that case, there's no time to waste! Lead the way, Luxray!" Ash said.

Luxray nodded, turned around, and began to run across the tunnel, the rest of the group following him. Of course, like Luxray had warned them, there were enemy Pokemon blocking the way. Some Smore with a few Sponee, and another Pokemon that looked like a bigger version of a Sponee, with a body that looked like a blue sponge, with six gray legs ended in blue tips sprouting from it.

"A new Pokemon. Let's see what we're up against," Ash said, Pokedex in hand.

" *Sponaree, the Sponge Pokemon, and Sponee's evolved form. Bug/Water. The sponge-like skin of this Pokémon is found in all parts of the ocean. How this Pokémon survives in salt water is a mystery.*" The Pokedex explained.

The Sponee and Smore all screeched in unison, and leaped at the group like a swarm of hungry locusts.

"Greninja, Aerial Ace!" Ash ordered.

Fast as lightning, Greninja dashed forward, both arms glowing with a white light, and quickly swatted away the Bug-type Pokemon before they could reach the humans.

"Spooo!" Sponaree cried as it fired a sticky web thread from its mouth. The thread quickly spread into a spiderweb that hit Greninja, immobilizing him from the waist up.

"Greninja!" Ash shouted.

"Luxray, Thunder Fang on that Sponaree, quickly!" Clemont ordered.

"Ray, ray!" Luxray cried, as he dashed towards the bug and Water-type Pokemon, a mass of electricity pouring from his mouth. He first snapped the thread binding Greninja, before sinking his electrified teeth into the soft body of the Sponaree.

"REEEEEE!" Sponaree screeched in pain at the super effective attack.

There was a loud noise coming from behind them, followed by a cacophony of high pitched screeches and buzzing noises.

"They broke the ice barrier!" Serena said in realization.

"Let's keep going, before these ones recover or the ones behind catch upon us!" Ash warned.

They continued running through the maze-like lair, sometimes having to stop to smack the occasional Bug-type out of the way. The noise coming from behind was increasingly louder, meaning that the mass of insects giving them chase was about to catch them.

"There! The exit!" Clemont said, pointing towards natural light coming from the end of the tunnel.

"Come on guys, keep going! We're almost there!" Serena encouraged.

While the exit appeared to be far away, they managed to cross it much sooner than they expected. The fresh if humid air of the jungle and the light filtering through the canopy was a welcome change for their noses and eyes in comparison to the stale air and utter darkness of the Anthell.

"Greninja, quick, block the exit with another Ice Beam!" Ash ordered.

Greninja nodded, and fired another freezing beam at the exit they had just crossed, completely plugging it with ice, before they continued running. By the time the insects would have destroyed the second ice barrier the group would be far away from the Anthell even if they wanted to chase the humans beyond their lair.

...

Once they left the Anthell, they spent a good five minutes running without looking back, hoping and praying to whoever entity may hear them to lose the bugs on their trail. After that, they took shelter under a very large tree, and once they stopped, they all began to pant heavily in order to catch their breath.

"Lux, luxray, lu!" Luxray cried, his enhanced vision activated. [I'm not seeing any of the Bug-type Pokemon from that lair chasing us. I believe we're safe for the time being.]

"Th... thank... you... Luxray," Clemont wheezed, a hand on his chest as he tried to regulate his breathing. "R-Return..."

"You too Greninja..." Ash said, not as exhausted as Clemont, but still out of breath. "Take a rest."

Ash then noticed that Serena had her tablet opened up, and she was typing something on it.

"Serena?" Ash asked.

"Here it is, the Anthell," Serena said, without taking her eyes from the screen. "Located in the central part of Baykal Forest, the Anthell was carved out by the jaws and legs of thousands of Bug-type Pokemon. It's the largest bug nest in all of Tandor, and while the species of Pokemon living inside are generally docile when encountered elsewhere, those in the Anthell are fiercely territorial," she read. She then paled a little before she kept reading. "According to rumors, in the deepest chamber of the cave lives the mother of all bugs, a giant, vicious queen that only wakes up once every few years to feed and lay eggs. Many trainers and scientists alike had tried to explore the Anthell to uncover its mysteries, but few of them ever returned. And those who did had nothing to tell but terrifying tales of a neverending swarm that devours everything in its wake..."

Now it was the rest of the group who paled, even Ash.

"Had we known about that, we would have taken the route that takes us furthest from that place," Clemont said.

"At least we know that for the return trip," Ash said, before opening up his Pokegear, and checking the GPS. "Okay, let's see where we are now. With how much we deviated from the route, we'll have to- WHOA!"

"What!?" Bonnie asked, worried. "We aren't lost, are we?"

"How much time is going to take us to return to the original path?" Serena asked, a little worried as well.

"Actually... it's the opposite. Turns out we're much closer to Amatree Town now," Ash said, scratching his head. "It seems that crossing the Anthell worked as a shortcut. According to this, we'll be in Amatree before the end of the day."

"Really? Awesome!" Bonnie cheered, pumping both fists. "In the end, Dedenne saved us a lot of travel time!"

"Nene!" Dedenne cheered as well.

"At least something good came out of this..." Serena sighed, as she slumped on the grassy ground.

"Though, let's avoid any 'shortcuts' for the trip back, okay?" Clemont almost pleaded.

...

After taking some moment to rest and catch their breath, the group continued their journey towards Amatree. They walked at a good pace, even Clemont, since the fact that their unexpected and terrifying detour had shortened the distance to the town in question had reinvigorated their spirits.

"I don't say this often, but man, traveling through this place these days left me dead beat," Ash said, as he stretched his limbs. "I can't wait until I get to sleep again on a bed."

"Same. This has to be one of the hardest routes we ever traversed," Serena agreed.

"Yeah. Whose bright idea was to put a town in a place like this?" Ash complained.

"Remember that the berry trees that grow here here produce berries way faster than any other berry tree in the world," Serena reminded Ash, her tone sounding a little like that of a teacher explaining a lesson. "Abundance of food is a big factor for people to choose a place to live."

"I don't know if all that food is worth it if it means living next to that lair full of crazy bugs..." Bonnie said, shuddering at the memory.

"And then there's those Mankey and Primeape who think the whole jungle is theirs. What a bunch of jerks!"

"Nene!" Dedenne agreed.

"PRIIIII!"

As soon as those words left Bonnie's lips, an angry looking Primeape -well, angrier than what's normal for them- landed in front of the group, followed by another, then another, then a Mankey, then more Mankey and Primeape, until they were completely surrounded.

Ash, Serena and Clemont couldn't help but stare at Bonnie.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" Bonnie quickly said. "I didn't know their hearing was so good!"

"I doubt they're here because you insulted them," Clemont said, pushing up his glasses. "In fact, they look like the same troop we encountered earlier."

"Did you come back for more? I don't want to fight you a second time, but don't think we won't ever defend ourselves!" Ash said in a challenging tone, as one of his hands went to his belt.

"Well... they did bring more friends this time around..." Serena noticed, looking around at the more numerous troops.

"One way or another, we aren't going to let them cower us! Raptorch, Aveden, I choose you!" Ash said, sending the same Pokemon he had used during the first battle against the Pig Monkey Pokemon.

"Quetzoral, Pancham, go!" Serena said, following Ash's example.

"Quilladin, Geigeroach, go!" Clemont said, and unlike his companions, he decided to pick two new different Pokemon.

The group's Pokemon met the many Mankey and Primeape's angry glare with one of their own, and prepared for the inevitable

onslaught.

But the onslaught didn't come.

"What are they doing?" Serena asked. "Aren't they going to attack us?"

"No, it looks like... like they're waiting for somebody," Clemont guessed, as he studied the wild Pig Monkey Pokemon.

"Great, so they're going to bring even more friends to help give us a beating," Bonnie deadpanned.

"Pi?" Pikachu asked, as his ears perked up. "Pi, pika, pi!" the yellow rodent warned, as he tapped Ash on the head.

"Pikachu said that he heard something coming," Ash translated. "Something big."

Perking up their ears, they could now hear the sound of heavy footsteps, each time coming closer. Whatever made them was bigger and heavier than a Primeape, that was for sure. Though Ash was sure that this new arrival wasn't friendly, given that the Primeape and the Mankey weren't worried in the slightest.

And in fact, they actually moved to the sides, as to leave room for said new arrival.

"RILLA!"

Pushing a few bushes away, the new Pokemon made its entrance. It reminded Ash of a Primeape, given that it had the same fur color and pig-like snout, but it was noticeably different. For starters, it was almost twice as big. Its body was thick and muscular, as opposed to Primeape's round shape, and had a dark brown furry collar around its neck. It had a curly tail, like a Mankey. Though the most striking features were its golden cuffs around its wrists and a golden crown on its head.

"W-What Pokemon is that...?" Serena stammered, as she pulled out her Pokedex.

"Empirilla, the Pig King Pokemon, Primeape's evolution, and one of Mankey's final forms. Fighting. When Primeape beats its rivals, it wins the right to wear the Jungle Crown, evolving it to the noble Empirilla, much stronger and more intelligent." The Pokedex explained.

"Wait, Primeape has an evolution?" Bonnie asked, shocked.

"Apparently so," Ash said, unperturbed by the revelation. "More than one, it seems."

"It seems like we just met the leader of this gang..." Clemont fearfully said.

Unlike the Mankey and Primeape, who hollered, smashed the ground with their fists, and bounced in place, Empirilla looked far more capable of staying calm. Or at the very least, to *appear* calm, since everybody could sense that the Pig King Pokemon emanated as much anger as its subjects.

"Eeeeeeeem... PI!" Empirilla screamed, pointing at the group.

The Mankey and Primeape screamed back in unison, and charged forward. However, a surprise awaited them.

"Aveden, Flash!" Ash ordered.

Upon hearing the command, the humans and their Pokemon covered their eyes while Aveden spread his wings, as his whole body shone with a light so bright that for a second, it illuminated the dark jungle like an artificial sun.

"PRIIII!"

"MA! MANK!"

The Mankey and the Primeape were caught off guard and were blinded by the burst of light, stopping them on their tracks and leaving them vulnerable to counterattack.

"Now, Raptorch, Flamethrower!" Ash shouted.

"Quilladin, Pin Missile, and Geigeroach, Half-Life!" Clemont ordered.

"Quetzoral, Razor Leaf! Pancham, Dark Pulse!"

The horde of Mankey and Primeape found themselves at the wrong end of a stream of flames, a rain of stings, a wave of radiation, a storm of razor-edge leaves and a beam of pure darkness.

"Em! Empi, em!" Empirilla growled, as it stomped its foot on the ground, sounding as if it was chastising its subjects for fighting so poorly.

While it was a devastating combo on paper, those five attacks weren't enough to beat that many enemies at once, but alongside Flash, they did their job: breaking the Mankey and the Primeape's formation. Even if they recovered from the blindness and the damage sustained from the elemental barrage and charged again, this time it was much more disorganized, allowing the trained Pokemon to form a solid defensive front.

Aveden and Quetzoral took to the air, pelted the Pig Monkey Pokemon with Air Cutters and Energy Balls from above, while dodging their -mostly Rock-typed- ranged attacks, though the sheer quantity meant that some of them would find their marks.

Raptorch parried with Brick Break a Karate Chop from a Primeape, and was saved by Pancham's Thunder Punch from another Primeape trying to ambush the Fire Dino Pokemon, who roasted the first Primeape with a powerful Flamethrower.

"Pancham, watch out!" Serena warned.

Three Mankey jumped on Pancham from different directions each, but thanks to Serena, the little panda was prepared. The Mankey tried to overwhelm him with their numbers, but the agile Playful Pokemon danced around them, almost literally, skillfully dodging their attacks while smacking them in the face with Arm Thrust or a Thunder Punch.

Quilladin used Vine Whip to ensnare a Mankey that was harassing Geigeroach, and pulled it towards him, before using it as a living shield against a Primeape who was about to smash him with a Fire Punch. The blazing fist slammed into the unlucky Mankey, though the idea of hurting an ally didn't seem to bother that Primeape in the slightest.

However, Geigeroach decided to return Quilladin's favor by striking the Primeape from behind with a powerful Nuclear Slash, knocking it out cold, while Quilladin tossed the Mankey against a group of its own kind that was attacking Quetzoral from the ground.

Then, fast as lightning, Empirilla, who hadn't moved at all since the battle began, dashed across the grass, standing right behind Geigeroach.

"Emp!" Empirilla cried.

"Geig?" The Radroach Pokemon asked, before turning around, just in time to see a glowing fist coming towards him.

A loud smack resounded around the jungle, and the next second Geigeroach was sent flying backwards, before painfully crashing against a nearby tree.

"Geigeroach!" Clemont cried in horror.

"Qui?" Quilladin asked, turning around to see his partner out of commission like that, and his surprise and shock turned to horror when he realized that Empirilla was right upon him.

"Quilladin, jump back, quickly!" Clemont commanded.

The warning came in time, as Quilladin jumped backwards just before Empirilla's fist was brought down on the spot he was a second ago, opening a small crater.

"Great! Now immobilize it with Vine Whip!" Clemont followed.

"Qui, quilla!" Quilladin cried as he sent a pair of vines towards Empirilla.

However, neither human nor Pokemon was counting on Empirilla having such sharp reflexes, as it was able to grab the vines before they could wrap around its body, and with a mighty pull, Quilladin was sent flying towards Empirilla.

"Q-Qui!?" Quilladin asked in shock as Empirilla grabbed him by one of its head spikes the moment he was within reach, before being slammed against the ground with so much force, there was a small quake.

"Quilladin!" Clemont cried.

But Empirilla wasn't planning to stop there, and set its sight on Raptorch and Pancham, who were dispatching a group of Mankey and Primeape without much difficulty. The Pig King Pokemon blitzed towards the duo, and grabbed Raptorch by the tail.

"R-Rap?" Raptorch asked in shock, just as Empirilla lifted him overhead.

"Aveden, quickly, help Raptorch!" Ash commanded.

"You too, Quetzoral!" Serena echoed.

The two birds nodded and dived towards the Pig King Pokemon before it could hurt Raptorch any further. Empirilla turned around, and seeing the two approaching Flying-types, it hurled Raptorch at them. Quetzoral was able to move aside, but Aveden wasn't fast

enough, and the Fire Dino Pokemon slammed against him, before both Pokemon fell to the ground in a tangled mess.

"Raptorch! Aveden!" Ash cried in horror.

Despite dodging Empirilla's attack, Quetzoral wasn't out of danger, as a Primeape dropped from a tree branch above her, making her fall to the ground under its weight, with another Primeape joining the first one to pin her to the ground.

"Que! Quet!" Quetzoral cawed as she trashed in a vain effort to get rid of the pair of Primeape restraining her.

Upon seeing her, Empirilla grinned maliciously and stomped towards the Grass and Flying-type Pokemon.

"You leave her alone, you brute!" Serena shouted, pokeball in her hand. "Syrentide-"

"CHAAAAM!"

However, before Serena had the chance to send her first Tandorian Pokemon, Pancham leaped at Empirilla from behind, latched on its head, and began to smack it repeatedly with Thunder Punch.

"Cham! Cham! Cham!" Pancham yelled each time he punched the Pig King Pokemon's head. Empirilla grabbed Pancham and tried to pull him out of its head, but Pancham had both his feet and his one free paw grab onto Empirilla's furry collar, while Empirilla ran from aimlessly from one side to another, as it tried to pry Pancham from its head.

"Em... eeeeeeeem... RILLA!" Empirilla shouted, finally pulling Pancham, even if it came at the cost of Pancham painfully tearing some hair from its collar. Its eyes practically red with anger, Empirilla angrily threw Pancham against a nearby tree with such force, the tree pretty much trembled.

"Pancham, no!" Serena cried, bringing her hands to her mouth-

Pancham slammed against the tree facefirst, before the bounce pushed him back, making him land on the floor on his back, his shades dropping from his head and falling next to him.

"Pan... pan? Pancham, pan!" the Playful Pokemon quickly noticed that his shades were no longer with him, and began to frantically look around, until he found them, lying on the ground a few meters from him, one of the lenses cracked. Still, he didn't mind, as the little Fighting-type quickly crawled towards them.

SMASH!

... before Empirilla's foot came down, crushing the shades under its weight.

"Pan...?" Pancham asked dumbly, looking at Empirilla's foot, now grinding the ground, before looking up at the owner of said foot, who looked at Pancham with a cruel smirk.

"Pancham..." Serena softly moaned.

Then, Empirilla removed its foot so Pancham could see what remained of its beloved shades, now shattered into a thousand pieces of glass and plastic.

"Pan... cham...?" Pancham weakly asked, sounding confused, as if his brain was struggling to process what just happened. But when it did, Pancham's confused face morphed into a mask of wrath, his eyes bloodshot and his mouth curved into a furious snarl.

"PANCHAM! PAN-PAN-PAN-PAN-PAN... !"

Then, there was a crackling noise, and Pancham began to glow with a blueish-white light. Empirilla's eyes grew wide open in shock, his smirk vanishing as it took an unconscious step back as it watched Pancham grow from a small thing that barely reached its knees to something tall and big enough to look at it from above.

When the light vanished, where Pancham stood there was now a furious Pangoro.

"GORO!" Pangoro loudly roared, making every Mankey and Primeape around the place flinch.

And much to its shame, Empirilla also flinched. However, anger quickly returned to the Pig King Pokemon, as it stomped towards the newly evolved Daunting Pokemon.

"Empi, em!" Empirilla hollered, as it dashed forward, its right fist glowing white.

"Pangoro, watch out!" Serena warned.

Pangoro didn't move, nor appear to even react to Empirilla's attack. That's it, until he raised an arm he used to catch Empirilla's glowing fist, stopping the wild Pokemon on its tracks.

"Em!?" Empirilla growled in indignation, clearly not used to somebody being able to match its strength. "RI!" Empirilla delivered another punch with his free hand, but Pangoro caught the other fist as well. Both Pokemon began to struggle, trying to overpower the other.

"Paaaaaaaan... !" Pangoro growled, as he slowly began to lift Empirilla over his head. "GORO!"

And with a mighty heave, the Daunting Pokemon tossed the Pig King Pokemon back with great force. Empirilla landed on the ground, and bounced a couple times before falling face first on the grass. This, of course, wasn't enough to beat the fight out of the combative Pokemon, who quickly jumped on its feet and charged again.

"Pangoro, use Stone Edge!" Serena called.

Unlike Oblivicorn, it seemed that evolution didn't make Pangoro unwilling to listen to Serena, as the large panda stomped the ground

with one of his feet, sending a row of rising stone pillars at the charging Empirilla. The large ape plowed through the stone pillars with ease, but the attack managed to slow down its charge forward.

Once Empirilla reached Pangoro, Serna issued the next order. "And now, Arm Thrust!"

Pangoro rose both his paws with the palms outward, which began to glow with a white light, before delivering a flurry of palm strikes at Empirilla, pushing it backwards with each strike.

"And Thunder Punch!" Serena said.

After delivering the final palm strike, Pangoro clenched a paw into a fist, before coating it in yellow electricity, and delivering such a powerful haymaker, Empirilla was sent tumbling backwards.

"E... emp..." Empirilla wheezed as it got back on its feet, and looked at Pangoro. And upon seeing the threatening snarl the Daunting Pokemon was sporting, panic invaded its body and ran away as fast as it could, while screaming in terror.

And seeing their leader defeated and humiliated, the Mankey and Primeape troop dispersed as well, not wanting to risk the wrath of Pangoro.

"They're gone..." Clemont noticed.

"Yay! Way to go, Pangoro! You showed them who's boss!" Bonnie cheered.

"Nenene!"

However, Pangoro didn't cheer.

...

Once the battle was over, the trainers went to check on their defeated Pokemon. Geigeroach, Quilladin, Raptorch and Aveden

had gotten the worst of it. Ash and Clemont had given them a potion in order to treat some of their injuries and restore some of their strength, but only the medical care provided at a Pokemon Center would restore them completely.

Quetzoral and Pangoro had some minor wounds, but they were otherwise good to go.

However, Pangoro didn't feel like he was ready to go anywhere. He was on the spot where his beloved shades laid, now reduced to tiny shards. He took one of the biggest glass shards with two fingers and looked at it, before dropping it on the ground, and sighed dejectedly.

"It's okay, Pangoro. They were just a pair of shades," Serena said, placing a hand on his now massive back. "The important part is that you're okay, and that you saved our other Pokemon by defeating that Empirilla."

"Pan..." Pangoro nodded, but his mood didn't improve.

"I promise you that we'll buy a better pair of shades when we see a store," Serena said in an attempt to cheer him up. However, even if she wasn't showing it, Serena did feel just as sad over the destroyed sunglasses as Pangoro did, given how they were a gift during a very special day that helped solidify their bond as trainer and Pokemon. "Much better than your old ones. What do you say?"

Once again, Pangoro nodded, though without much energy.

"Now rest up, Pangoro. You had a difficult day today," Serena said, returning her newly evolved Pokemon to his pokeball.

Serena then looked at the shattered shades. Like her Pokemon, she also sighed, before cleaning said shards with a broomstick and a dustpan, and dropping them on a bag.

"We should keep going," Ash suggested. "We're not that far from Amaree, and after the beating they got, our Pokemon need to rest at

a Pokemon Center."

"Yeah, let's," Serena said, looking around. "The sooner we leave this jungle, the better."

Author's Note: And thus heroes cross the treacherous Baykal Forest. It's easily one of the hardest routes to traverse due its length, maze-like layout, sheer number of enemy trainers, and density of wild Pokemon encounters.

How did you find Ash's nightmare? It seems like his subconscious is starting to like the idea of him and Serena being an item, huh? And yeah, I decided to use Serena's newest outfit and being set on Lilycove as a reference to the Serena Return episode in JN.

You thought that after two of Serena's Pokemon evolved the last chapter, it'd take some time until another evolution happened, huh? Well, you thought wrong! Say hello to Pangoro. Given that Serena now has a Dark-type in her team, it wouldn't take long for Pancham, who is both strong and experienced, to reach his final form. The destruction of his beloved shades was the push he needed in order to evolve.

And whew, the Anthell is sure creepy, isn't it? Thankfully, it's not like the plot will force Ash and co. to return there and explore the place even further :D

Thanks a lot to Lipeghoul, Fox McCloude, Guest, Sanjixyz and Viroro-kun for reviewing the last chapter, and special thanks to Viroro-kun for betareading this chapter, whose edits and suggestions made it so much better.

Next chapter, our heroes finally arrive at Amatree. Ash and Serena have another date, and Serena will try again to obtain her final ribbon. In the meantime, don't forget to leave a review with your thoughts on this chapter!

The Mistress of the Z-Moves

Chapter 41:

The Mistress of the Z-Moves

Amatree Town

Thankfully, the group managed to reach Amatree Town without further incidents. As per usual, they were greeted by a welcome sign, which said a lot about how many people often visited the town in question:

Welcome to Amatree Town

Wow, you found this place, good job.

While they would normally take some time to go around the town and see the sights, the group's experiences with the Mankey and Primeape troop and the Anthell had left them completely exhausted, so all they could think was in heading straight to the Pokemon Center, leave their Pokemon for much needed medical care, and head straight to bed without even having dinner.

Things turned out to be much better the next morning. After a good night of sleep, the group's energies were fully recharged, and their Pokemon were restored to full health. And given that none of them had dinner last night, they woke up especially hungry, so they headed to the Center's cafeteria in order to enjoy a hearty breakfast.

"So, tomorrow's the contest," Ash began, as he took a bite of a pancake dripping with honey. "What do you plan to do today, Serena?"

"I'd like to train with my Pokemon during the morning and noon, then relax in the afternoon so my Pokemon are fully rested for the contest," Serena explained, before taking a sip from her juice.

"Do you have any idea on Pokemon you're going to use?" Clemont asked.

"I was planning a new performance for the Appeal Round with Selkid and Pancham... then Selkid evolved, so I had to change it to take into account her new form," Serena scratched her cheek. "Then Pancham evolved yesterday, so guess I'll have to see if I can still do it now that he's a Pangoro."

"You should totally use Mega Evolution! I'm sure you'll score first place!" Bonnie excitedly proposed.

"Mega Evolution? I'm not sure..." Serena began. "I mean, I only had Syrentide Mega Evolve once.. can I really do that for a contest?"

"I'm with Bonnie. Plus, sometimes in order to win something you have to risk something," Ash agreed.

"Yeah. If Leona can use her Z-moves in a contest, I don't think why couldn't you use Mega Evolution," Clemont pointed out.

"Well, if you insist so much... I will give it a try then," Serena finally conceded.

"Yay!" Bonnie cheered.

...

Though, once breakfast was over, they moved to the battleground next to the Center in order to train -thankfully enough, it was vacant-. Before starting, Serena made an attempt to talk with Oblivicorn, but the Dark Horse Pokemon refused to listen to her, and went to lie on the ground next to the Center. The honey blonde would have liked to try for longer, but she had only so much time to prepare for tomorrow, so she regretfully left Oblivicorn to her own device and focused on the rest of her Pokemon.

Turns out Serena didn't have to tweak her initial performance that much, given that, despite his much larger bulk, Pangoro had retained almost all of the agility and speed he possessed as a Pancham.

Then came the hardest part, or at least, the part Serena considered the hardest, even if in the end it really wasn't: testing Syrentide's Mega Evolution.

"Alright Syrentide, show us your Hydro Pump!" Serena commanded.

"Greninja, block with Water Shuriken!" Ash ordered.

Greninja, already transformed in order to match his opponent's power, took the shuriken on his back and made it expand until it was twice its original size, using it as a cover from a powerful torrent of water Syrentide was expelling from her mouth, a new attack Syrentide had learned over the past few days after evolving.

And while Greninja was pushed backwards, his defenses held firm until the attack stopped.

"Well, I say that both you and Syrentide are doing pretty good," Clemont observed.

"Yeah, Syrentide didn't go all crazy like Korrina's Lucario when she tried to master Mega Evolution," Bonnie reminded her.

"Lucky me, I guess," Serena replied. "Great job, Syrentide. I think using Mega Evolution for the contest will be safe then."

"Sy, ren!" Syrentide nodded, smiling.

...

Once they tested Mega Evolution, Serena went on to have multiple double matches with Ash using every other Pokemon except Oblivicorn in order to prepare for the battle portion, since she wasn't entirely sure who she was going to pick, though she assured she'll make a choice before the next day.

Noon came much faster than either of them anticipated, so they decided to make a pause to have lunch, before resuming the training.

Later in the afternoon, Serena decided to call it a day and let her Pokemon rest for the remainder of the day. As for herself, she felt she could go on a walk through the town, given that due the circumstances of their arrival, she had barely saw any of it, and asked Ash if she wanted to come and make it into the date he had asked her after he had that mysterious nightmare during their trip through Baykal, something the teen boy eagerly agreed to.

Hand in hand, the two teens walked at a calm pace through the town, taking a good look at their surroundings, since Serena had never seen such a town like Amatrie in her life.

Amatrie was a pretty rural town, albeit in a different way from Vinoville: while Vinoville was surrounded by farms and crops, Amatrie was a town built in the middle of the jungle, split by a large river. The houses were made entirely of wood, some on the ground and others built on the top of the trees. Dirt roads crossed the town, and as the sun began to slowly set, some people used Palij and Pahar to light large tiki torches that existed in place of lampposts.

Serena would sometimes take a look at her tablet, opened on a website that talked about Amatrie in order to learn more from it. Something that amazed her was the fact that, until recently, people there lived without electricity. The town, however, was forced to put a hydroelectric generator by the river which supplied electricity to both the Pokemon Center and the Contest Hall, since the Pokemon League and the Pokemon Contest Committee wouldn't allow a town without a working Pokemon Center up to international standards to have a Gym.

"This town is amazing," Serena said, marveling at her surroundings. "Look at that! Some people even live in treehouses! Have you seen anything like this before?"

"Yeah, people in Fortree City also live in treehouses," Ash casually said. "It's a place in Hoenn."

Serena let out a sigh, but smiled. "Sometimes I forget that by the time I joined you when I started my Pokemon journey, you had already seen so many places..."

"Hey, it's okay. You pretty much saw half of a new region. And in time, you'll see many more," Ash cheered her. "No need to rush it."

"And enjoy the journey, right?" Serena asked.

"Exactly!" Ash energetically said. His statement was followed by a loud roar coming from his stomach. Chuckling, he added: "And a great part of a journey is to taste the different foods from the places you visit, hehe."

"You know, there are a few restaurants that specialize in food using the unique berries that grow on Baykal. Maybe we could have dinner on one of them?" Serena suggested, as she tapped the screen on her tablet twice. "Oh, I think-"

"Praise the Tapus, it's Serena! And Ash!" a cheerful voice said behind the couple, a voice that was familiar yet Serena didn't hear it in quite some time.

Looking to the side, they saw a smiling girl with light brown skin and long hair styled in dreadlocks. A girl they hadn't seen since they left the Tandor Luxury Cruise.

"Leona!" Serena said, just as happy to see her. "I wasn't expecting to see you here. Come for the contest, I guess?"

"Your guess is right," she replied. "I heard there was a contest here, but not that many trainers drop by, because apparently the only path here is a dingy jungle. And I'm like, 'yeah, like a little jungle is going to slow me down!', and if fewer people come here, then there will be less competition, so the better!" she said, before huffing and looking

in the direction of the Baykal Forest, as if the mere memory of crossing it exhausted her. "Boy was I wrong. Thank goodness my Pokemon were in top shape, because damn, I know some wild Pokemon can be territorial, but there's being aggressive, and there's being a psycho!"

"Trust me, we can relate," Ash said, chuckling a little.

"Oh well, if anything, it served as some training and- oh wait, you guys are on a date, aren't you?" Leona said, noticing that the two of them were holding hands. "In that case, I won't intrude anymore!"

"You're not intru-"

"You say that, but I'm sure that you're counting the seconds until I scam," Leona said good naturedly as she began to walk away. "So I'll leave you alone so you can have fun on your date. See you tomorrow at the contest, Serena!"

And the Alolan girl disappeared behind a corner, leaving the pair of teens alone again.

"I mean it. As in, it's not that I wanted her to join us for the whole day, but I wouldn't have minded if she stayed and talked for a bit," Ash said.

"I wouldn't have minded either, but I can't say I wouldn't have reacted the same way had our roles been reversed," Serena admitted. "Anyway, before Leona called us, I just found a restaurant that looked pretty good. It's even in a treehouse!"

"Really? Awesome! Lead the way!" Ash said.

Serena did as Ash said. Though, as she walked, her thoughts began to drift away little by little from the date to the unexpected encounter, and the contest that was less than a day away.

"Leona will be in tomorrow's contest. If we battle each other again, she'll wipe the floor with my Pokemon with those Z-moves of hers," she started to think. *"Should I change plans and use Mega Syrentide for the battle round then? Though, I'm not really sure if Mega Evolution would be enough to weather the sheer power of those attacks..."*

"Serena?" Ash asked, tugging her hand a little. "Are you okay? You're kind of zoning out..."

"Oh! Sorry! I was just... thinking about tomorrow's contest..." Serena began.

"Because of Leona?" Ash ventured to guess. "Yeah, I remember the last contest she was in. If you fight against her again, she'll be a tough nut to crack."

"Yeah..." Serena agreed. Then, her lips curved into a smile as an idea dawned upon her. "Ash, I think I know what Pokemon I'm going to use tomorrow."

...

The next day, the group wasted no time, and once they got up from bed and had some breakfast, they headed towards the town's Contest Hall. While Serena entered through the back door, Ash, Clemont and Bonnie stood in the line to buy a ticket.

Sometime later, once all the tickets had been sold, all the spectators was on their seats, and all the coordinators were ready, the contest began.

"Ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to the Amatrie Town Pokemon Contest! I'm your host, Jillian Meridian!" she began, and the crowd exploded into loud cheers. "Thank you! Also give a warm welcome to the judges that will evaluate our wonderful coordinators: Moki Town's own Nurse Joy, the Venesi City Gym Leader Rosalind, and the S-Class connoisseur Ambrose Reigns!"

Jillian then went to explain the rules of the Pokemon Contests for those in the public not aware of them, and then showed the ribbon the contest winner would take with him or her, finishing off with introducing the very first contestant, beginning the Appeal Round.

Coordinators walked in and out of the arena one after the other, their Pokemon doing all sorts of tricks, light shows, dances and acrobatics. Ash found some of them good, while others still had room for improvement. Though Ambrose, as usual, found none to his tastes, which let them know in the harshest possible way,

"Time for our next performance! From Heahea City in Alola, Leona!" Jillian announced.

Leona's body language as she walked into the stage pretty much exuded joy, as she waved and blew kisses at the public, who roared in anticipation.

"Wow, people went wild when Leona was announced," Bonnie noticed.

"Yeah. She seems pretty popular," Clemont agreed.

"Maybe it's because of those Z-moves?" Ash wondered. "They're something most people here haven't seen so far."

"Rise and shine, Vaporeon, Jerbolta!" Leona said, tossing two pokeball forward.

The pokeballs opened, as a torrent of water burst from one, and a mass of yellow electricity from the other, and the two Pokemon emerged from within each of the elemental bursts, Jerbolta shining with golden sparkles.

"Alright Jerbolta, Electroball into the air! And Vaporeon, Aurora Beam into it!" Leona began.

"Jer, jer!"

"Vaporeon!"

The two Pokemon did as they were told, Jerbolta forming a sphere of yellow electricity on the tip of its tail, before launching it into the air, and Vaporeon firing a multicolored beam at the golden orb, which gained the same colors of the Aura Beam once the two attacks collided, resulting in an explosion of multicolored sparks of electricity.

The public gasped in awe.

"A very strong beginning from Leona! Let's see how her performance continues!" Jillian excitedly commented.

"Now Vaporeon, launch Jerbolta into the air with Hydro Pump!" Leona continued.

The Shiny Pokemon ran towards Vaporeon and leaped above it while curling into a ball, and just as Jerbolta was above Vaporeon, the Bubble Jet Pokemon spewed a huge stream of water that launched the Ground and Electric-type into the air.

"Electro Ball all around you while you're in the air, Jerbolta!" Leona commanded.

"Jer, jerbolta!" Jerbolta cried, as he began to spin around, sending a rapid fire of Electro Balls that quickly exploded into a golden shower of sparks.

"And now, for the real meat of this show!" Leona held her left arm, allowing everybody to see her Z-Ring, with a deep blue crystal on it.

The public went wild.

"And Leona prepares to wow the audience with her trademark Z-moves!" Jillian said in anticipation.

"Now Vaporeon, Hydro Vortex!" Leona said, as she made a series of arm poses, ending with a wave of both her arms to the right.

Vaporeon mimicked its trainer's moves as well. "And Jerbolta, Thunderbolt into it!"

There was a loud "ohhhhhh" from the audience as a deep blue aura surrounded Leona, before said aura flowed into the Vaporeon through a stream of light of the same color, charging it with power.

"Vaaaaaaa... !" Vaporeon said, as a mass of water began to form around it. "-REON!"

The water around Vaporeon formed into a massive spiraling column that shot upwards, in a way that reminded Ash of the Waterfall attack used by Cali's Gyarados, albeit this attack was much wider and carried far more water. Then, as Jerbolta fell down, it released a massive lightning bolt into the Z-Move, making it crackle with yellow electricity, before the attack dispelled.

"And done!" Leona said.

The public broke into a wild applause, while many began to loudly cheer and shout encouragement to the Alolan girl.

"Once again Leona manages to impress the audience with her performances! Now let's see if the judges are just as impressed as the public!" Jillian said, motioning to the judge panel.

"While admittedly, the Z-moves have lost the surprise factor from the first times you used them, they never fail to bring pure, undiluted spectacle to your performances. Great job!" Rosalind praised.

"Yes. Seeing you on the stage made me wish more people from Alola would come here to take on our Contest Circuit," Nurse Joy added.

"Your combinations were boring and uncreative, so of course you have to rely on those Z-things to make up for your lack of talent, don't you? Unlike the nurse here, I hope we don't get invaded by more one-trick Minicorn who think that they can impress people with

the same gimmick over and over again," Ambrose said with his usual venom.

"Thanks a lot!" Leona said, her smile never faltering, before recalling Vaporeon and Jerbolta. "Even if you liked my performance, I hope they can become even better in the future!"

"Thank you Leona, for yet another amazing performance!" Jillian said, as Leona returned to the waiting room. "And now, let's welcome our next coordinator!"

...

"Hey, there, Serena!" Leona skipped towards the honey blonde as soon as she saw her in the waiting area. "How was that?"

"It was simply amazing," Serena told her, smiling. "Those Z-moves are sure something. Though the previous parts were really well planned and executed. Loved the way you mixed water and electricity."

"I know! Water and electricity is a great combination! Except when you're taking a bath, hehe," the Alolan chuckled.

"Anyway, you shouldn't worry too much. With a display like that, you'll be one of the eight finalists," Serena assured her.

"Let's hope you're right. Because I can't wait to win my final ribbon!" Leona said.

"So you have four ribbons already? That's the same as I have," Serena said.

"Ohhh, so you're fighting for your final ribbon too! Then you must be as psyched as I am to win this! But alas, there can only be one winner, and that shall be me!" the younger girl boasted.

"There's only a couple months left until the Grand Festival. I think all the people still doing contests must have at least three ribbons and

are trying their best to earn the remaining ones before the Grand Festival begins," Serena pointed out. "That's not even counting those who have all the ribbons already."

"Do you know anybody who already got all the ribbons?" Leona asked, raising an eyebrow. "Because they must be some crack coordinators in order to get all five this early."

"Two people, actually. You know one of them. Remember Sayaka, the girl you fought during the contest at the cruise before you faced me in the finals?" Serena asked.

Leona placed a finger under her chin as she tried to remember. "Oh, that girl! Yeah, I remember her!" Leona said with a snap of her fingers. "That arrogant girl. So she has all the ribbons already? Pity, I was hoping to meet her again. She looked like she needed an even bigger serve of a humble pie with that tantrum she threw after I beat her fair and square. Guess I'll have to wait for the Grand Festival to get my chance."

Right after Leona said that, one of the monitors showed a picture of Serena with the words "NEXT CONTESTANT" written under it.

"At least I may get another chance at fighting you again," Leona said with a shrug. "So go out there and knock them on their asses!" she said with a wink.

Smiling back, Serena walked towards the stage just as the coordinator before her entered the waiting area.

...

"And now, let's give a warm welcome to another veteran of the contest circuit! From Vaniville Town in Kalos, Serena!" Jillian announced.

The audience broke into cheers and applause as the honey blonde walked into the stage, the loudest being those from Ash and Bonnie.

"You can do it, Serena!" Ash cheered.

"Show them who's boss!" Bonnie followed.

"Syrentide, Pangoro, go!" Serena said, tossing the two pokeballs into the air.

The first pokeball released a flurry of golden stars from which Pangoro emerged, while a spiraling torrent poured from the second, revealing Syrentide once it disappeared.

"Alright, time to put on a show! Syrentide, Water Pulse! As big as you can make it, and launch it into the air!" Serena shouted.

"Sy!" Syrentide nodded, as she formed an orb of water between her hands. As she moved her hands outwards, the orb began to grow as the Siren Pokemon poured more of her power into it. Once it was as big as herself, she sent it flying upwards.

"Great! Now, Pangoro, launch Syrentide into the air, and Syrentide, get inside the orb of water and freeze it from the inside with an Ice Beam!" Serena commanded.

"Syren!"

"Goro!"

Pangoro lifted Syrentide with a gentleness many in the audience found surprising, given his appearance, before tossing her upwards, just as the Water Pulse came down. However, the moment Syrentide entered the liquid orb, she froze its surface from inside, encasing herself inside the sphere of ice and water.

"Now Pangoro, push it upwards with Dark Pulse!" Serena called.

"Pan, pangoro!" Pangoro said, thrusting his cupped paws upwards, sending a stream of dark power that pushed it back into the air.

"And now..." Serena said, as she held her right hand, and touched the keystone on the index finger with her left hand. "... Mega Evolve!"

Beams of light shot from the ring and pierced into the frozen bubble without breaking it. However, cracks began to form as the transformation released more and more energy, until it finally shattered, revealing Syrentide in her Mega Evolved form, who pummeled to the ground as the Dark Pulse vanished.

"Catch her, Pangoro!" Serena ordered.

The public gasped loudly, as they began to cheer.

"It seems that Leona isn't the only one using power-ups to enhance her performance!" Jillian excitedly commented. "What a creative use of Mega Evolution to simulate a metamorphosis!"

Just as Jillian finished saying that, Pangoro caught the falling Syrentide between his arms.

"Alright Pangoro, now Stone Edge on yourself, and Syrentide, Sing!" Serena issued.

Pangoro stomped his foot once, rising a pillar beneath his feet that pushed him and Syrentida upwards, while the Siren Pokemon intoned a slow and melodious song, as ethereal musical notes of different colors began to float around the growing pillar.

"And finish!" she said.

Once again, the public broke into an applause accompanied by very loud cheers.

"And once again, Serena's performance never fails to impress! Hopefully, the judges will be just as impressed!" Jillian said, motioning to the judge panel.

"That effect with the Mega Evolution was simply magnifico!" Rosalind gushed. "It's not something you see that often in contests!"

"Plus, I loved the way Pangoro and Syrentide worked together," Nurse Joy added. "Their synchronization was almost flawless while performing those complicated stunts."

"First the Z-moves and now Mega Evolution... is this the future of contests? What happened to pure skill and creativity? Because real coordinators wouldn't rely on these crutches so much," Ambrose scoffed.

"Thank you," Serena said, bowing a little and doing her best to ignore Ambrose's words, before returning her Pokemon and returning to the waiting area.

...

Inside the waiting area, Serena was greeted by Leona, who, looking even more excited than before, grabbed her hands while bouncing in place.

"Oh my goodness Serena, that was amazing! How your Pokemon transformed... !" Leona's eyes were glinting. "What was that!?"

"It's called Mega Evolution. Never heard of it?" she asked.

The younger girl shook her head. "Well, I heard it here and there upon arriving here, but never thought what it was and I never saw it in action! To see Pokemon transform it like that! It was like normal evolution but... it wasn't?"

"Well, aside from Tandor, Mega Evolution is also widely used in my home region of Kalos. Though I myself didn't begin to use it until very recently," Serena explained.

"I see. How does it work?" Leona asked, eager to learn.

And thus, Serena explained the intricacies of Mega Evolution. How in order to trigger it, you needed a Keystone and the appropriate Mega Stone ("Just like how Z-Moves need a Z-Ring and Z-Crystal!"), that it was important for the trainer and Pokemon to have a strong bond or else it wouldn't work ("Z-moves need that to work too!") and how only a few select Pokemon could Mega Evolve, and all of them were fully evolved ("Z-moves can be used by any Pokemon no matter what, though there are some moves exclusive to some Pokemon").

As Serena finished explaining to Leona about Mega Evolution, the last of the coordinators left the stage, concluding the Appeal Round.

"And thus the Appeal Round comes to a close!" Jillian announced. "The judges have already cast their evaluation and score of each coordinator. Now, the eight coordinators that will move to the next phase will appear on the screen!"

Serena and Leona held their hands in anticipation as the faces of the eight finalists appeared on the screen. The tension was short lived, given that they were the first ones to appear on the screen, Serena being the first and Leona being second.

"Yes! We passed!" Leona cheered, as she began to bounce up and down.

"And look at that! First and second places!" Serena pointed out.

"That Ambrose guy might have not liked that we used Z-moves and Mega Evolution for our performances, but even he had to admit how much they rocked!"

While they were talking, the portraits of the eight finalists shifted their position in order to show the order to the matches. Leona's match was the first, while Serena's was third, meaning that they wouldn't face each other unless the two of them made it to the finals.

"See you in the finals then," Serena said.

"Just like in the last contest we both take part," Leona said, before holding a fist and shooting Serena a stare full of resolve. "And just like the last time, my Pokemon and I will walk out as the winners!"

"We'll see about that," Serena replied, her voice carried as much determination.

...

And thus the combat round began. Leona's match went first, and her two Pokemon of choice were something Ash had never seen before. Well, one looked like a Golem, but it didn't look like any other Golem Ash had seen before, since it was a different color, had thick black eyebrows, a beard and a mustache, and two black rocks jutting out of its back that formed a rudimentary looking railgun.

"Is that... a Golem?" Clemont asked, as he adjusted his glasses, echoing Ash's own thoughts.

He pulled out his Pokedex in order to find the answer.

"Golem, the Megaton Pokemon, Alola Regional Variant, the evolved form of Graveler and final form of Geodude. Rock/Electric. It fires rocks charged with electricity. Even if the rock isn't fired that accurately, just grazing an opponent will cause numbness and fainting." The Pokedex explained.

"A regional variant. Didn't Professor Bamb'o say that he studied them?" Clemont asked, his mind recalling their first encounter with the eccentric professor.

"Whoa, a Pokemon from the same species, but another type... seeing one in person is so cool!" Ash gushed. "Wonder if there's a Pikachu variant in another region...?"

"Pika..." Pikachu said, not sure how to feel about that.

"What about the other Pokemon? It looks a lot like Cali's Cararalm," Bonnie pointed out.

Leona's second choice was a huge crustacean Pokemon, with a large, flat green body whose back was covered in sand, and had a large palm tree growing on it, six thick brown legs that looked like the tree trunk of a palm tree, and a pair of huge pincers. It reminded Ash of a Torterra if it was a crustacean instead of a reptile.

"Cocancer, the Beach Pokemon, Cararalm's evolution and Cocaran's final form. Grass/Ground. They bury themselves in the sand and are indistinguishable from ordinary palm trees. When prey walks by, they leap out with surprising speed and crush it with massive claws." the Pokedex explained.

Ash remembered how tough Cali's Cararalm was, and its evolved form didn't look any weaker. All in all, Leona had a rather impressive tag team. Her opponent, for her part, had chosen an Owten and a Terlard.

The ensuing match was mostly even, with both coordinators' score dropping points at an almost equal pace, and neither Pokemon outmatching the other. That's it, until there was one minute late and Leona brought something to the table that disrupted that balance in a major way.

"Subzero Slammer!"

The moment Cocancer unleashed that Z-move, Ash knew that the battle was good as over. The public cheered wildly when Leona executed the spectacular move, and continued cheering when the Alolan girl was declared the winner.

Once the second match was over, it was Serena's turn. Her choice of Pokemon were Quetzoral and Sylveon.

"Huh? Quetzoral and Sylveon? I thought she was going to give Delphox another chance," Bonnie said, scratching her head.

"That was her idea at first. But upon seeing that Leona was in the contest, she decided that it would be better to use those two," Ash explained.

"Makes sense. Of all of Leona's Pokemon we saw, all of them but one have a type advantage over Delphox," Clemont reasoned.

Serena's opponent was a boy with a Drilgann, and another Pokemon Ash had never seen before, a pink bipedal rabbit with a big, white furry tail and a pair of small purple antler-like horns.

"What's that? A regional form of Buneary?" Bonnie asked.

"Only one way to know," Ash said, relying on his trusty Pokedex once again.

"Jackdeary, the Jackalope Pokemon. Fairy/Fighting. It is related to Buneary, but is much more crafty. It conceals itself using trickery, so many people don't believe it exists." The Pokedex droned.

"Close, but no," Clemont commented.

Serena made short work of her opponent, quickly depleting all his points before the timer even reached the two minute mark, allowing Serena to pass to the semifinals.

The semifinals proved to be a little more exciting than the previous matches, though Leona and Serena won once again, the former delighting the audience with a Ground-type Z-Move, the appropriately named Tectonic Rage, which tore apart the battleground almost as much as the opponent's unfortunate Pokemon.

And thus came the final match, pitting Serena against Leona.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the final match of Amatrie Town's Contest is about to begin! On one side, Serena from Vaniville Town in Kalos!" Jillian said, and the public cheered.

"Come on Serena, leave them dazzled!" Clemont cheered.

"We're all with you!" Ash added.

"And on the other side, from Heahea City in Alola, Leona!" Jillian said, motioning to the dark skinned girl, and the public cheered just as loud, if not louder than for Serena. "Coordinators, send your Pokemon!" Jillian told them.

"Quetzoral, Sylveon, go!"

"Rise and shine, Golem, Cocancer!"

Serena's pokeball produced a rain of pink flowers and leaves, as well as a waterfall of pink mist, revealing Quetzoral and Sylveon once the special effects dispelled. Meanwhile, yellow lightning bolts and a sandstorm came from Leona's pokeballs, with Cocancer and Golem emerging from said elemental effects.

"The final Contest Battle begins now! Five minutes on the clock! Begin!"

~Serena (Sylveon, Quetzoral) VS Leona (Golem, Cocancer)~

"We'll take the first move!" Leona said, eyes glinting with excitement. "Golem, Rock Blast! Cocancer, Crabhammer!"

"Go, golem!"

"Can!"

Golem lowered its body, aiming its railgun at Serena's Pokemon, and began to fire several rocks at them, while Cocancer rushed forward as fast as its six legs allowed it to, as it raised a massive pincer which was covered in a cloak of water.

Leona's aggressive opening didn't worry Serena much. "Quetzoral, charge an Energy Ball! Sylveon, Swift into it!"

"Queeeeeeee... !" Quetzoral cawed as she began to form a green orb of power, while Sylveon waved her feelers, releasing a flurry of golden stars which homed into the Grass-type attack.

As the golden stars touched the Energy Ball, they were absorbed into it, making the latter attack grow. Once it had eaten all the stars, the much larger orb also took the shape of a star.

"Send it forward, Quetzoral!" Serena ordered.

With a mighty beat of her wings, the large green five pointed star flew forward, easily shattering the rocks Golem was firing before homing into the Pokemon launching them, blasting it backwards.

"Golem, no!" Leona cried, bringing her hands to her head.

It didn't end there, since the projectile ricocheted off of Golem, and thanks to the homing properties of Swift, crashed into Concancer next before the Beach Pokemon could reach melee range, blasting it to the side as well.

"And Serena masterfully counters Leona's opening move with a magnificent combination attack!" Jillian commented, as Leona lost no less than twenty percent of her points.

"Golem, Concancer, are you okay?" Leona asked. Despite the powerful hit, both Pokemon managed to get back to their feet, and cried in agreement. "Great! Our start wasn't that hot, but we're about to turn the tables of this match right now! Cocancer, Sandstorm!"

"Caaaaaaa... !" Cocancer cried, before slamming both pincers into the ground, raising a tornado of sand that engulfed the whole arena.

But while neither Cocancer nor Golem seemed affected by the Sandstorm, its effect was immediately felt by Serena's Pokemon.

"Syl!" Sylveon whined.

"Tzoral!" Quetzoral cried as she tried to keep afloat among the Sandstorm.

"You're going to need something more than a little sand to take us out! Sylveon, Moonblast! And Queztoral, combine it with Drill Peck!" Serena ordered. "Aim for Cocancer!"

"Syyyyyy!... !" The Interwinning Pokemon created a glowing sphere of pink power between her feelers before throwing it forward.

"Tzo, quetzoral!" Quetzoral cawed as her beak glowed white and doubled in length, and began to spin like a drill.

Queztoral pierced the Moonblast with her Drill Peck and added its power to her attack, resulting in her beak being covered by a white and pink spinning energy drill. Despite the sandstorm impeding her flight, she was still fast enough to reach Cocancer...

"Huh?"

... right before the Beach Pokemon moved out of the way with surprising speed, making Queztoral miss the move.

"Well done! Now Golem, Mega Punch!" Leona called.

"Gooooo... !" Golem clenched one of its hands into a fist as his body crackled with yellow sparks. The Megaton Pokemon rushed towards Queztoral, delivering a powerful punch that produced an explosion of yellow lightning bolts, sending Queztoral tumbling backwards.

"Quetzoral!" Serena cried, covering her mouth with her hands.

Serena's points dropped to match Leona's.

"Hey, what gives! How is Cocancer suddenly that fast!?" Bonnie protested. "And she said Mega Punch, but that looked like a Thunder Punch to me!"

"Nenene!" Dedenne protested as well.

"I think this is the same as my battle with Davern's Drilgann," Ash said. "Remember how fast it became upon summoning a sandstorm? Cocancer must have a similar ability."

"Hmmm..." Clemont hummed, as he looked at the Golem. "That aura around Golem before it attacked... almost looked like Nucleon when he used a Normal-type move. I believe Golem must have an ability to turn Normal-type moves into Electric-types as well."

"Our turn to counterattack!" Leona declared, thrusting an open hand forward. "Golem, Discharge! Cocancer, Ice Punch on Quetzoral!"

"Sylveon, counter with Shadow Ball! And Quetzoral, Razor Leaf!" Serena ordered.

Golem's entire body crackled with electricity, before firing three lightning bolts, one for each of the other Pokemon on the battlefield. Sylveon managed to intercept one with Shadow Ball while several of the leaves fired by Quetzoral blocked the other. The third one harmlessly washed over Cocancer, coating it in electricity.

"Cancer!" Cocancer cried as it easily dodged the other half of the Razor Leaf, before reaching Quetzoral and delivering an ice-coated pincer smash to the Canopy Pokemon's face, on top of the electricity from Golem's Discharge.

"Queeeeeeeee!"

"Quetzoral, hang on!" Serena called, as her points dropped even further, now close to the halfway mark.

"It dodged again!" Bonnie protested, as she huffed and crossed her arms. "That darn sandstorm!"

"The synergy between Leona's Pokemon is simply breathtaking! And that Sandstorm only makes things even more difficult for Serena!" Jillian commented.

"In that case, we'll get rid of it!" Serena boldly declared, looking as if she just had an idea. "Quetzoral, Drill Peck, aim upwards! And Sylveon, Fairy Wind into the Drill Peck!"

"Que, quiet!" Quetzoral said, as her beak doubled in length and glowed with a white light, before it began to spin like a drill. And just like Serena had ordered, she leaned her head back so her beak would be pointing upwards.

"Syyyyyyyl-VEON!" Sylveon waved her feelers, producing a gust of pink sparkly wind, and following Serena's indications, focused it on Quetzoral's Drill Peck,

The two attacks combined, with the Drill Peck shaping the Fairy Wind into something akin to a tornado, which began to grow and expand outwards.

"What... what are you doing?" Leona asked, both confused and a little scared.

"Yes! Keep going! You're doing great!" Serena cheered on.

The pink tornado continued to grow and expand, and as it did that, the sandstorm struggled to continue, until it was broken, the sand falling apart as the wind currents keeping it on the air had been nullified by Serena's impromptu combination.

"Incredible! With that ingenious combination, Serena had put a swift end to the sandstorm!" Jillian gushed, as Leona's points dropped, even if they were still above Serena's.

"And that's not all! Sylveon, Shadow Ball, rapid fire!" Serena commanded, a little emboldened by the sandstorm's disappearance.

"Sylll-ve-ve-ve-VEON!" Sylveon cried, as she fired a barrage of small orbs of pure darkness.

"Golem, counter with Rock Blast!" Leona quickly said, as Golem bent over, and fired a salvo of rocks from his stone railgun.

"Quetzoral, get close and use Giga Drain on Golem!" Serena ordered.

"Cocancer, stop her with Ice Punch!" Leona countered.

"Dodge it!"

As the shadow orbs fired by Sylveon crashed and exploded against the rocks fired by Golem, Quetzoral dived towards the Megaton Pokemon. Cocancer attempted to smack her with a pincer covered in frost, but it was too slow and the Canopy Pokemon reached Golem. Quetzoral's beak started to glow with a vibrant green light and stabbed it into Golem.

"GOOOOOO!" the Rock and Electric type Pokemon cried in pain as Quetzoral stole its vitality.

"Cocancer, Ice Punch again! Rid Golem of her!" Leona hastily ordered.

"Quetzoral, get out of the way, now!" Serena ordered.

With a push from her tail, Quetzoral jumped out of Golem and began to fly away, just as Cocancer, unable to stop its momentum, slammed an ice-covered pincer onto Golem.

"Oh, no!" Leona cried, taking her hands to her head.

"That was quite the blunder Leona made in her rush to stop Quetzoral from further harming Golem!" Jillian commented as Leona's points dropped below the halfway mark.

"Yes! Let's keep our momentum! Sylveon, Moonblast! Quetzoral, Energy Ball!" Serena ordered. "Combine them into one big move!"

Quetzoral and Sylveon came together, and joined their power to form a large orb of power, colored pink with green endges, before throwing them forward. It left a trail of green and pink sparkles as it flew.

"That's not going to stop us! We have a combo of our own!" Leona shouted. "Golem, Discharge again! And Cocancer, Wood Hammer!"

Golem's body crackled with electricity before firing several lightning bolts, one of them harmlessly hitting Cocancer while the others crashed against the Energy Ball/Moonblast combo. Meanwhile, one of Cocancer's pincers began to glow green, before it was covered in an aura of the same color with the shape of a massive tree stump. Swinging the energy stump down against the emerald and pink orb, it produced an explosion of the same color that blasted Leona's Pokemon backwards.

Both Leona and Serena's points dropped, but Leona's went down further than Serena's.

"There's only one minute left, and Serena has quite the comfortable lead!" Jillian pointed out. "What can Leona do to turn this battle around?"

"Do you need to ask?" Leona asked, as she held her left arm, the one with the Z-Ring. It had a yellow crystal on it. "Come on Golem, time to finish this and take that ribbon home!"

The public guessed what Leona was planning to do, as they began to voice their excitement over what the Alolan girl was about to do.

"Yes, she's going to do it!"

"The Z-move!"

"I'm sorry for Serena, but she has already lost!"

"Hey, the match isn't over yet!" Ash protested, but his voice was drowned among the multitude. He didn't need to remember the last time Serena and Leona fought to remember the sheer power of the Z-moves, since the Alolan coordinator had used them in the previous matches, so it was easy to understand why the public already believed that the match was over.

But Serena had a plan in case she had to face Leona and her Z-moves again. It was the reason behind her choice of Pokemon. Ash just hoped it would work.

At the very least, Serena wasn't panicking. That was good.

"Sylveon, Quetzoral, get ready!" she warned her Pokemon.

Leona and Golem made a series of moves, finishing with a pose that looked like they were making a "Z" with their arms. The exact same sequence for the exact same move the Alolan girl had used to crush Serena back at the cruise.

The public's roar of anticipation became even louder.

Just as she finished the sequence, a yellow aura of electricity appeared around Leona's body, before it was transferred to Golem.

"Taste the power of Alola! Gigavolt Havoc!" Leona exclaimed.

Golem spread its arms, forming a massive orb of lightning before thrusting the gigantic lightning sphere forward, advancing unimpeded towards Serena's pair of Pokemon. Despite the scale of the attack, neither Serena or her Pokemon were scared.

"Alright, let's do it! Quetzoral, get behind Sylveon, and prepare an Energy Ball with as much power as you can muster! Sylveon, Protect! Make it big!" Serena commanded.

"Syl, sylveon!" Sylveon cried, her eyes flashing white, before erecting a green barrier around both herself and her partner, just in

time to stop the massive torrent of electricity, producing a booming noise so loud, almost everybody was forced to cover their ears while it lasted.

"And... it seems that Serena is trying to block the Gigavolt Havoc with a Protect!" Jillian observed. "Protect can block any normal move, but will it be enough for a Z-move?"

"It won't! Protect may cushion some damage, but it won't stop the move!" Leona proudly added.

And indeed, true to Leona's words, cracks started to appear around the Protect, and while the Gigavolt Havoc appeared to reduce in size, it was still pretty big.

"I know. That's what the Energy Ball is for!" Serena said, before looking at Quetzoral, who was forming an orb of green power almost twice as big as a normal Energy Ball. "Release it, now!"

"Tzoral!"

The Canopy Pokemon did as she was ordered, sending the attack forward. The sphere of natural energy clashed against the torrent of lightning, still grinding away the Protect. And much to everybody's shock, the plus size Energy Ball started to push the Gigavolt Havoc back, which continued to get smaller.

"Yes! She's going to make it!" Clemont said, as his hopes were slowly reinvigorated.

After a few excruciatingly long seconds where the three attacks pushed against each other, all of them burst into a shower of sparks, sparkles and bits of lights, having exhausted all their power.

Serena's Pokemon hadn't been harmed.

For a moment, the most absolute of silences reigned in the contest hall.

Leona's points dropped once again, falling below the twenty five percent mark. Not that Leona noticed, given that she was looking at Serena with her eyes wide open. She blinked once.

"... what?" she asked, her voice almost a whisper.

"Amazing! With a combination of Protect and Energy Ball, Serena has done what no other coordinator has done so far in the season, and put a hard stop to one of Leona's Z-moves!" Jillian announced, her voice carrying even more excitement than usual.

"... what?" Leona repeated.

"Sylveon, Shadow Ball on Golem! Quetzoral, Drill Peck on Cocancer!" Serena said, reminding everybody that the contest battle hasn't ended just yet.

Serena's two Pokemon quickly went on the offensive, Sylveon firing an orb of darkness at Golem while Quetzoral dived at Cocancer, her glowing beak twice its normal size and spinning like a drill. Leona's Pokemon were waiting for their trainer to issue some order, but in her stupefied state, they never came, and the two attacks found their mark, costing Leona even more points.

"Great! Now, Sylveon, Fairy Wind! And Quetzoral, Razor Leaf!" Serena ordered.

Once again, Sylveon waved her feelers in order to create a pink, sparkly gust of wind, which was combined with a barrage of sharp leaves fired by Quetzoral.

Leona was finally snapped out of her trance, not that it did her any good. "Cocancer, Golem, huh... eh..."

The combination attack hit Leona's Pokemon. It wasn't enough to knock them out just yet. Not that it was necessary.

BZZZZZZZZZZZ!

"Leona has lost all her points! That means the winners are Serena and her Pokemon!" Jillian announced.

The scoreboard changed to show Serena's picture next to smaller ones of Sylveon and Quetzoral, with the word "WINNER!" written under it. The public broke into a litany of cheers and applause.

"Yes! We did it! We won!" Serena cheered. "Great job guys! You were incredible!"

"Syl, sylveon!" Sylveon replied.

But Quetzoral didn't say anything, and stayed there, immobile like a statue.

"Quetzoral...?" Serena asked.

There was a crackling noise, as Quetzoral's body began to shine with a bright bluish white light, and began to grow and change.

"Look at that folks! The contest might be over, but the spectacle continues as Serena's Pokemon is gracing us with a live evolution!" Jillian commented. Not that there was anyone in the audience who didn't notice such an event.

Quetzoral's body kept growing and growing, becoming more lithe and streamlined in the process, her wings being replaced by small arms. The light fading signaled the end of the evolution, letting everybody see the new Pokemon, gently floating over the stage.

"Co, coatlith!" she cried.

The new Pokemon in front of Serena was, for a lack of better word, massive. If Quetzoral was already taller than her trainer, this Pokemon was almost three times as long. Gone were all the avian features of Chicatl and Quetzoral, the new Pokemon being a long, serpentine dragon with a green body and a yellow underbelly.

Her face was black and beak shaped, her head ending in a black and red horn, with a pair of red fins at each side of it. She had two small arms ending in red claws, and a row of small red plates ran down her back. At the end of her tail was a massive flower bud, also colored red.

"Whoa, look at the Pokemon Quetzoral evolved into! So big and cute!" Bonnie squealed.

"So Quetzoral had another evolution left..." Ash said, as he pulled out his Pokedex.

"Coatlith, the Forest Lord Pokemon, Quetzoral's evolution and Chicoatl's final form. Grass/Dragon. Early natives of Baykal worshiped Coatlith as gods. They are fiercely devoted to protecting nature, and will attack anyone, friend or foe, who defiles it." The Pokedex explained.

"Wow... that Pokemon must be sure something if there was a time they were worshiped as gods..." Clemont said in amazement.

Back on the stage, while Serena and her friends basked in the glory of her victory, Leona had to endure the bitter taste of defeat.

"I'm sorry guys, I failed you," the Alolan girl told her Pokemon.

"Lem!" Golem said, shaking his head.

"Co, cancer!" Cocancer added, patting Leona's shoulder with a pincer.

"You didn't fail them," Serena said, as she walked towards them, with Sylveon walking next to her and Coatlith floating above. "It was a great battle, Leona."

"Thank you," she said, the girl's usual energy no longer present in her voice. "Heh, I thought I already had you when I was about to use Gigavolt Havoc, and then... bam, I lost."

"It tends to happen. I remember losing a match that I believe was already won because my opponent revealed a hidden ace in the hole," Serena said, placing a comforting hand on the younger girl's shoulder. "Don't feel bad about it. You may have failed here, but the contest season is far from over. Never give up until the very end."

"I... thank you." Leona said, nodding. "Gotta say, that tactic to stop my Z-move... it was sure something. You knew that Protect alone wouldn't cut it, didn't you?"

"My first match against you was difficult to forget. That's why I did some research on Z-moves, just in case we ever crossed paths again, and devised a way to counter them," Serena explained.

"Well, it paid off big time," Leona said.

Serena nodded. "Training hard is well and good, but another rival of mine showed me that research, either be new tactics for you to use or what your opponent does, can carry you far."

"I'll keep that in mind," Leona replied, before returning her Pokemon.

A few minutes later, Serena was standing on a small podium, the three judges and Jillian next to her. Rosalind was the one who was holding an opened box with the Ribbon on it.

"A bellissima victory, Serena," the Gym Leader said, allowing Serena to grab the ribbon inside it. "The Amatee Ribbon is yours."

"Thank you," Serena said, grabbing the ribbon and taking a moment to admire it.

"Given that this is your fifth ribbon, we'll be hoping to see you again at the Grand Festival," the strangely dressed woman added.

Serena nodded, before raising the ribbon above her head. "Ta-dah! I won my final ribbon!"

"Oh, by the way, you're a companion of Ash Ketchum, aren't you?" Rosalind asked. Serena nodded, and the Gym Leader added: "Tell him that, if he defeats Tiko, to come to Venesi City and challenge my Gym. I'll be waiting for him."

"I'll tell him. I'm sure he'll be glad to hear of your invitation," Serena said.

"And thus, the Amaree Town Contest comes to an end! I hope you have a great time, and see you next time!" Jillian said, officially ending the contest.

...

Right after the contest was over, the group returned to the Pokemon Center and had a big lunch to celebrate that Serena had won her fifth and final ribbon, meaning that she was qualified to take part in the Grand Festival, which would take place in Venesi City in two months time.

Serena's victory had pumped up Ash even more than Serena herself, and coupled with the fact that it was still early in the afternoon, plus Rosalind's invitation to her Gym if he defeated Tiko, Ash wanted to do nothing more than challenge Tiko and get his badge right now.

"I'll get my fifth badge the same day Serena got her fifth ribbon!" Ash had boldly declared, as he and the rest of the group headed to the Gym.

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu had agreed.

Unfortunately, they found an unexpected obstacle that would throw a wrench in Ash's optimistic plans: a closed fence on the road to the Pokemon Gym, with a sign that explained that Tiko had been called to deal with some disappearances in the Anthell.

"Aw man, what a bummer," Ash said, slumping a little. "But guess that if there was an emergency like that, it can't be helped..."

"Well, it's not that we're in a hurry, now that there are no more contests in the immediate future," Serena said. "If you still feel with energy, how about if we spend the rest of the day training for when Tiko returns?"

"Yeah. Tiko is West Tandor's strongest Gym Leader. It would do you no good to go unprepared," Clemont agreed.

"I guess I have no choice... alright then, training time it is!" Ash said, immediately recovering all his usual gusto. "When Tiko gets back, he won't know what hit him!"

...

While Ash and his friends returned to the Pokemon Center, deep in the Anthell, a pair of Bug-type Pokemon, a Firoke and a Sponaree, carried a cocoon of silk. One as large as a human being.

And if there were more light, one could see through the silk threads that, indeed, there was an immobilized but still breathing man with dark skin and short brown hair styled in cornrows.

Author's Note: And thus Serena earns her fifth and final ribbon! Beacuse after how awfully things have been going for her recently, I think our girl deserved a respite, don't you think? And the cherry on top, Quetzoral evolving into Coatlith! And yes, I'm aware that this is the fourth of Serena's Pokemon to evolve in a row in less than four chapters, but I just couldn't find better moments for them to evolve. Oh well, at least Serena's team is now completely evolved.

You know, in the game, Amatre Town doesn't have electricity at all, so that means you don't get a Pokemon Center (thankfully, there is an NPC that will heal your Pokemon) and thus no PC,

meaning that you will have to be very careful with which Pokemon you choose to bring there, because they will stay with you until you get to another city. But here, in a slightly more realistic setting, I couldn't envision the Pokemon League and the Pokemon Activities Committee greenlighting an official Gym and Contest Hall in a town that doesn't have a proper Pokemon Center, so I changed it so there is some electric power.

Many people expected Victor to return, and indeed the poor guy has been quite some time absent, but I chose Leona because I wanted to show Serena overcoming a Z-move (without using Mega Evolution herself) before the Grand Festival. Sorry Leona, but that's what happens when you rely on a gimmick to act as a crutch instead of honing your skill.

Next episode, I'd like to say that Ash would be fighting for his fifth badge, but as you can see he's kind of "tied up" right now. Hopefully somebody will fetch him before he becomes some bugs' snack.

Thanks a lot to Fox Mc Cloude, hirowriter, sanji xyz, BrightNova169 and MegaSalamence64 for reviewing last chapter. Sadly, this chapter wasn't beta read by my usual beta Viroro-kun since he was unavailable. Hopefully he'll be back for the next one.

As usual, don't forget to leave a review with your thoughts or opinions on this chapter, since it's the last regular contest of the story. When contests return, it will be the Grand Festival.

Into the Anthell

Chapter 42:

Into the Anthell

Amatree Town

"Syrentide, Hyper Voice!" Serena called.

"Frosulo, Protect! And Raptorch, get behind him!" Ash replied.

As Syrentide let out a sonic scream, Frosulo formed a green energy barrier around himself and his partner, blocking the incoming destructive soundwaves.

"Now, Coatlith, fly over them and use Dragon Rage!" Serena ordered.

As Ash's Pokemon dealt with the Hyper Voice, Serena's second Pokemon floated above them, blue and purple flames spilling from her beak-like mouth, before unleashing them in the form of a torrent above them.

"Counter with Flamethrower, Raptorch!" Ash quickly ordered.

"Ra, rap!" Raptorch said, taking out a deep breath and releasing a stream of orange and yellow flames.

The two blazing attacks met in the middle, struggling against each other, but failing to overcome the other, before both attacks exhausted their power and were snuffed out.

Ash had spent the previous day training with Serena and Clemont. And today, after getting up and having breakfast, Ash dashed towards the Gym once again only to find it closed for the second time in a row, much to his disappointment. So all that was left to do

was return to the Pokemon Center and continue training on the battleground next to it.

After all, sooner or later, Tiko would get back.

"Well done, guys!" Ash congratulated his Pokemon, before smirking at his opponent. "Nice try Serena, but you aren't going to catch me off guard so easily!"

"I was only warming up. Let's see if you can-" Serena was saying, before being interrupted by a crackling noise.

Suddenly, Frosulo's body started to glow with a bright, bluish white light. There was a noise of something shattering, as the ice chrysalis that made his body broke into tiny ice pieces, as the evolving Pokemon rose into the air, growing a bigger body, with three legs growing on each of his sides, and four wings on his back.

"Fro, fros!" the newly evolved Pokemon said, as blue glittering dust fell with the flap of his wings.

Frosulo's new form was a large, moth-like Pokemon, with a white furry body with a blue underbelly, six legs, also covered in white fur ending in three short claws, a furry collar also white with light orange tips, and four wings that appeared to be made of ice, with fuzzy orange trimming.

"Amazing! Frosulo just evolved!" Serena said, admiring the new Pokemon.

"Whoa, it's so beautiful!" Bonnie, who was sitting on a bench, squealed. Pikachu, sitting next to her, rubbed his ears and shot her an annoyed stare.

"Yeah! Okay, let's see..." Ash said, as he scanned his new Pokemon with his Pokedex.

"Frosthra, the Frost Moth Pokemon, Frosulo's evolution, and Colarva's final form. Bug/Ice. They leave a shimmering trail of ice crystals behind them as they fly. They are prized in many regions for their rarity and beauty." The Pokedex explained.

"No wonder those Team Omega jerks had several Colarva to sell, if this is their final form," Ash said, taking a look at Frosthra, who was now flying around Serena's Pokemon.

"Seems like all the training you were able to get before the Gym opened was a blessing in disguise," Serena pointed out.

"Yeah! I can't wait to see what Frosthra can do now! And no better place for that than a Gym Battle-oof!" Ash was interrupted by Frosthra tackling him into a six armed hug, leaving him covered in frost bites.

"Fro, frosthra!" he happily chirped.

"That might not be the best idea," Clemont, also sitting on the same bench as Bonnie, interceded. "From what I could hear, Tiko is a Fire-type specialist. A Bug and Ice-type like Frosthra might not be the best choice of Pokemon."

"Oh come on, you know type advantage isn't everything," Ash retorted, as he gently pushed Frosthra.

"Maybe you should listen to Clemont, Ash. Tandorian Gym Leaders have proved to be very strong and skilled, and Tiko is among the strongest," Serena reminded him. "You'd do good not to underestimate him."

Remembering his losses to Maria and Vaeryn, Ash begrudgingly acquiesced. "Alright, no Frosthra then..."

"Fros?" Frosthra asked, before lowering his head in sorrow.
"Froooooo..."

"Hey, don't be so glum, buddy. There will be more Gym Battles," Ash reassured him. "I promise I will use you in the next one. What do you say?"

"Thra," Frosthra nodded, now visibly happier.

"Say, it's past noon. How about if we go to the Center's cafeteria, have some lunch, and then go to the gym to see if Tiko's back?" Ash suggested.

"Sounds like a plan," Serena agreed, with Clemont and Bonnie both nodding.

...

A few minutes later, the group was at the Center's cafeteria, where they were enjoying a nice meal while they talked among themselves. Though, the topic at hand was inevitably what was on everybody's minds, Ash's imminent battle against Tiko.

"So, we've been training a lot, but so far you haven't told us what Pokemon you are going to use against Tiko," Clemont pointed out.

"Well, you've told me I shouldn't use Frosthra or Metalyx, so that doesn't leave me with too many options," Ash replied.

"You should choose Greninja! You haven't used him since Davern, and since he's a Water-type he should do well against Tiko, right?" Bonnie suggested.

Ash took a look at Greninja, calmly eating his food alongside the rest of their Pokemon. It was true that he hadn't used Greninja in a while, given that he wanted to use his newest Pokemon better; not just to give them a chance to prove themselves, but also to prove that he didn't need to rely on his veteran Pokemon to tackle the challenges of a new region.

Still, his Tandorian Pokemon had grown a lot since he caught them: all of them had evolved at least once, Raptorch being the only exception, and that was because he was his most recent capture, and all of them had proved their worth multiple times. So maybe Ash could go back to use Greninja more regularly. He was sure the frog would appreciate seeing some action after staying on the sidelines recently.

Suddenly, something happened that snapped Ash out of his thoughts: the rest of the people in the cafeteria began to murmur among each other, get up and walk to the lobby, from which an increasingly louder buzz of a crowd came from.

"What's going on over there?" Clemont asked, looking to the door that led to the lobby.

"Maybe Tiko is back from the Anthell and people are giving him a welcome?" Bonnie suggested.

"Yeah, I'm sure it's that!" Ash said, with the same energy as a kid who was told Christmas came early this year. "I'm going to challenge him to a Gym Battle right now!"

"Ash, wait!" he heard Serena say. "Tiko might not be in condition to fight you!"

Oh well, Ash could wait. But he at least wanted to make Tiko know that there was a challenger waiting for him.

And indeed, once Ash got to the lobby, he saw a large crowd of people standing around someone or something Ash couldn't see, murmuring among themselves. The Pallet Town native pushed past the crowd in order to get to Tiko.

But what he saw wasn't the Gym Leader, but the Center's Nurse Joy, who was holding a badly beaten Palij.

Ash looked at the Parrot Pokemon in confusion for a couple seconds, before he looked at the blue haired nurse and asked: "Nurse Joy? Who's that Pokemon? What happened to it?"

"Don't you know, kid?" a man to his right said. "That's one of Tiko's Palij!"

"What?" Ash asked.

"Yes. I've treated it many times. I would recognize it anywhere," Nurse Joy confirmed.

"Pa... pali..." the Fire Parrot Pokemon squawked.

"But... where is Tiko? Isn't he back?" Ash asked, as worry began to creep up his spine.

"I don't know... only this Palij came. There's no news of Tiko or his other Pokemon," Nurse Joy admitted.

People around him began to murmur in worry, wondering what might have been of their strong and beloved Gym Leader.

"Ash! What's going on?" Clemont asked, as he, Serena and Bonnie pushed past the crowd as well.

"Clemont! I need you to fetch the PST right now!" Ash quickly told him.

"The PST? But why-"

"No time to explain, go get it!" Ash insisted.

Thankfully Clemont didn't argue and went to get the translating device.

"Ash, what's going on? What's with that Pokemon?" Serena asked.

"Nurse Joy says that's Tiko's Palij," Ash said, and the honey blonde gasped. "It came to the Center alone and badly beaten. There's no news of what happened to Tiko."

"Oh no! Ash... you don't think that Tiko..." Serena began, unable to finish that sentence.

"That's why I asked Clemont to go get the PST. Ah, Nurse Joy, wait!" Ash said, as her Aromatisse and Miasmedic helpers gently put the Palij on a stretcher.

"I'm sorry, but I need to treat this Pokemon as soon as possible," Nurse Joy replied.

"No! I mean, I have a device made by Professor Cypress that can translate what a Pokemon says!" Ash shouted, making the nurse shoot him an incredulous look. "If we use it on Palij, we can ask him what happened with Tiko!"

And just that moment, Clemont returned with the PST in hand.

"Very well. You have a couple minutes before I take it inside," the nurse said.

Clemont handed the device to Ash, who moved the microphone close to the Palij.

"Hey pal, we need to know what happened to your trainer. Where is Tiko? Is he still at the Anthell? Is he okay?" Ash asked.

"Pa... palij, pa, pal..." Palij painfully squawked. [The bugs... they ambushed us... and overwhelmed us... Tiko sent me here... to ask for help... before the bugs got to him...]

The translated tale drew a collective gasp of horror as people began to murmur among themselves, this time louder than before.

"No!"

"There's no way those bugs took down Tiko!"

"What are we going to do now?"

"Tiko was our strongest trainer! If the Anthell claimed him, what can we do?"

The crowd continued to murmur and discuss among themselves what they could do, as despair kept getting larger and larger.

"I will go to the Anthell to get him back," Ash stated.

The crowd's buzzing was brought to a screeching halt, as everybody looked at Ash as if he had grown a second head. But Ash didn't budge.

"Come on kid, you can't be serious! That place is extremely dangerous!" a woman stated. "If Tiko has been taken down by that horde of insects..."

"Then he will be waiting for somebody to rescue him. And if not me, then who? Because I don't see anybody else volunteering," Ash stated. "Plus, I'm not defenseless. I have a team of very strong Pokemon that can help me navigate that place."

"Ash, are you really sure about that?" Serena asked. "I agree with what you said but... shouldn't we call the Rangers instead?"

"By the time they get here it may be too late," Ash said. And judging by their looks, Serena and Clemont knew he was right. "Plus it's not just Tiko. Tiko went to the Anthell to begin with to rescue some people who disappeared there. They need our help too."

"In that case, I'll go with you. That place is a maze and you might get lost. With Luxray, navigating that place and finding Tiko and the other victims will be much easier," Clemont said, even if Ash could tell a kilometer away that the idea of going to the Anthell terrified him.

"I'll go with you too. The more we are, the better," Serena offered, and Ash smiled at her in gratitude.

"Given that Dedenne has been there before-" Bonnie began, before Clemont interrupted her.

"Oh no, you aren't coming, Bonnie! That place is too dangerous for somebody as young as you!" Clemont replied. Bonnie wanted to protest, but the Lumiose Gym Leader wouldn't let her. "I can't keep an eye on you while we're in that nightmarish place. You'll stay at the Pokemon Center and wait for us to return, understood?"

Bonnie clenched her fist and pouted, but didn't protest. "... fine. But you better come back, you hear me?"

"Don't worry Bonnie, it'll take more than a few wild Bug-type Pokemon to bring your brother down. Especially if he has Serena and I to watch his back," Ash reassured the lemon blonde. "Alright, no time to waste! To the Anthell!"

...

Roughly an hour later, after leaving Amatree and returning to the Baykal Forest, Ash, Serena and Clemont were in front of the same tunnel entrance they had run from the first time they had stumbled into the aptly named Anthell. Thankfully, this time around no angry troop of apes tried to attack them in revenge for a past slight.

The trio of teens stood immobile in front of the entrance, looking at the cobwebs hanging from the roof and the pitch-black darkness that hid both danger and horrors within it.

"So... shall we go inside?" Serena asked, as she nervously played with the hem of her skirt.

"Yeah," Ash said, as his hand went to his belt. "Take a couple of Pokemon out first. Raptorch, Frosthra, I choose you."

"Right. Sylveon, Delphox, come out," Serena said.

"Luxray, Quilladin, go," Clemont said.

The six Pokemon materialized in front of their trainers, all six of them facing the entrance to the dark tunnel.

"Clemont, have Luxray lead the way," Ash told the lemon blond.

Clemont nodded, before grabbing the PST and switching it on. "Luxray, we're about to head into the Anthell. We're looking for several people who have disappeared inside. I need you to find them."

"Lu, luxray!" Luxray nodded. [It shall be done, boss. Follow me!]

With Luxray at the lead, the group of humans and Pokemon entered the dreaded insect lair. There was no need for Clemont to pull out the Heliolisk Lantern since the flames of Raptorch's tail and Delphox's ignited wand provided enough light for them to see where they were going.

So far, they haven't encountered any enemies, but they did hear the pitter-patter of small legs crawling from one place to another, reminding the group that they weren't alone and that they were being watched. All of them agreed that if the bugs hadn't attacked them just yet it was because they hadn't gathered enough numbers to mount an attack.

But it wouldn't take long until they did.

"Lux, ray!" Luxray said, as he took a briskier pace, turning a corner. [I found something!]

Following the Gleam Eyes Pokemon, the group entered a small empty chamber with several silk cocoons of varying sizes inside it.

Taking a step forward, Ash grabbed a small cocoon and ripped it open, revealing an unconscious Mankey inside it.

"A Mankey...?" Serena asked.

Pikachu jumped off of Ash's shoulder, and lightly slapped the Mankey in order to wake it up. Once it did, the confused primate looked around, before letting out a short screech and running away. Meanwhile, Clemont and Serena ripped open other cocoons: one of them had a Chacoatl, the other had a bunch of berries.

Then Ash opened the last one, and it was another chimp-like Pokemon with brown fur, a furry green collar of leaves, who was wearing what looked like a Tiki Mask.

" *Tikiki, the Tiki Mask Pokemon. Grass. It hides its true face behind a wooden mask. They will often convene in order to dance elaborate dances.*" The Pokedex explained once it scanned the unconscious Pokemon.

"What... what is this place?" Serena asked.

"One of their food stockpiles, it seems," Clemont grimly noted.

Serena grimaced. " *Food stockpile ?*" She repeated.

"I knew they said that the bugs here were ravenous, but I never imagined Pokemon starving so much that they'd eat other Pokemon,," Ash said, as he shook the Chacoatl to wake it up. Once it did, the confused Green Chick Pokemon looked around, before running away, scared.

"And the people who have disappeared..." Serena began shaking the Tikiki awake. "You don't think that they... that they..." she couldn't even bring herself to finish that thought.

"I don't know, but we should assume the worst," Ash said, inspecting the cocoons. "No Tiko or other people inside these cocoons, though."

Clemont gulped loudly. "Let's hope they just moved them somewhere else and they haven't been turned into some insect's meal just yet."

Luxray led them through the eerily empty tunnels to another chamber, also filled with silk cocoons. Some had berries on them, while others had Pokemon. This time, they found a pair of Chicomatl, a Primeape, and a Hagoop. They left the berries there and woke up the Pokemon, who quickly scurried away once they regained consciousness.

"Come on, we have to keep going. We still haven't found any of the-"

"Lu, luxray!" Luxray warned, as he took on a fighting stance. [Watch out! A horde of enemies incoming!]

As soon as Luxray say those words (and the PST finished translated them) the tunnel they were in began to rumble as the sound of thousands of legs coming towards them could be hear louder and louder, until a veritable wall of bugs threatened to engulf them, their buzzing and clicking cries echoing through the tunnels.

[Intruders, stop the intruders!]

[The Queen is hungry! Bring more food to the Queen!]

[Protect our home from the invaders! Don't let them steal the Queen's food!]

[More food for the Queen!]

Ash felt tempted to switch the PST off so they couldn't hear the unnerving battle cries of the army of bugs, and knew that his friends and the Pokemon felt the same.

"Everybody, attack!" Ash ordered.

And attack they did.

Raptorch roasted with a Flamethrower a horde of Tricwe that approached them from the left side.

Frosthra swiped with a well aimed Shadow Claw at a pair of Smore that tried to drop on Ash from the ceiling.

Quilladin used his own body to block a Bubble Beam aimed at Delphox, his arms crossed protectively in front of his face, before bombarding the offending Sponaree with a Pin Missile.

The aforementioned Delphox used Psybeam to counter a Shockwave from a large, six legged yellow furry Pokemon that no one had seen before.

" Harylect, the Shock Spider Pokemon, and Tricwe's evolution. Bug/Electric. They gather near sources of electricity and therefore are drawn to human dwellings and power plants. They can plug their antennae into a wall socket to recharge." A quick scan from the Pokedex provided that bit of information.

The battle continued as Ash commanded Frosthra to use Powder Snow to freeze a bunch of Smore and Tricwe that were getting close, but when the Frost Moth Pokemon beat her wings in order to produce a frozen gust of wind, the intensity of the resulting attack was much higher than that of Powder Snow, not only freezing the targets, but covering the wall and floor of the tunnel in solid ice.

"Hey look, Frosthra just learned Blizzard!" Clemont pointed out.

"Yes! Well done, Frosthra!" Ash congratulated the ice moth.

"Fro, fros!" Frosthra smiled earnestly at the praise. [Aw thanks! In this form, I feel like I can push myself like never before!]

Though thankfully he didn't abandon the fight to give Ash one his signature freezing hugs.

A Firoke and a Harylect shot an Fire Spin and a Thunderbolt, which were stopped by Sylveon's Protect. Using Sylveon as cover, Luxray bombarded the two attacking insects with a barrage of golden stars.

A Harylect and a Tricwe fired a Shockwave and a Thundershock, respectively, at Sylveon, attacking from a flank. Fortunately, Raptorch managed to jump in the way and shield the Intertwining Pokemon with his body, letting the electric attacks harmlessly crash into his body, before smacking them with a powerful Brick Break.

"Raptorch, watch out!" Ash warned.

Unfortunately, the warning came too late, as Raptorch was blasted by two Bubble Beams and a single Water gun being fired by a trio of Sponaree. The three super effective attacks blasted the Fire Dino Pokemon against a wall.

"Raptorch!" Ash cried.

Before the three Sponge Pokemon could attack even further, Luxray slammed into them with a Wild Charge, sending them flying in an explosion of yellow sparks.

Unfortunately, despite Luxray's save, the attack had left Raptorch too weak to continue fighting.

"Raptorch, return!" Ash said, grinding his teeth in anger, before picking another pokeball. "Aveden, I choose you!"

"Av, aveden!" Aveden cawed. [I'm ready to fight, sensei!]

Though, the moment Aveden said that, a Harylect leaped at him, its jaws crackling with electricity. Thankfully, before the Thunder Fang could hit, said Harylect was blasted away by Delphox's Hidden Power.

"Ave!" Aveden. [Thank you, miss!]

"Del, delphox, pho!" Delphox replied. [No need to! You can return the favor by blowing away these disgusting creeps, though!]

"I have a better idea! Everybody, cover your ears!" Ash warned.
"Aveden, Sing!"

Everybody did as Ash warned, while Aveden began to sing as loudly as he could. Thankfully, the echo of the tunnels helped to carry his voice. Ethereal musical notes started to appear around the tunnels, as the Anthell inhabitants started to feel drowsy.

"This is our chance! Attack now, all at once!" Ash commanded.

He didn't need to tell them twice. Streams of fire, blades of compressed air, sharp stingers, freezing winds, electric blasts and golden stars all rained upon the half asleep swarm of bugs, violently blasting them backwards, knocking many of them out cold.

And upon seeing their inability to stop the outsiders and the damage they were taking, the group of bugs dispersed and scurried away, running through the different tunnels that formed the Anthell.

Despite the victory, there was no celebration, as they knew that this was only one battle of many that would come. Though there would be one cause for a brief celebration as a crackling sound was heard, followed by Aveden's body glowing bluish white.

"Aveden?" Ash asked.

The Bliss Bird Pokemon started to grow in size as it changed, briefly illuminating the tunnel as the process took place. Once the light vanished, they could see the new Pokemon Aveden had evolved into.

"Sple!" he cawed.

Ash quickly took his Pokedex to know more about Aveden's new form..

" Splendifowl, the Paradise Bird Pokemon, Aveden's evolution, and Birbie's final form. Normal/Flying. Its spectacular plumage makes it a frequent target of poachers. However, due to the heavy feathers, it's not a great flyer." The Pokedex explained.

Splendifowl was a fairly large bird, at least tripling his size upon evolving. His body was still navy blue, and kept the same light blue mark on his belly, except that there was another red mark under it. He now had a long, yellow crest that ran down his back and went down his white tail.

"Wow! It's so beautiful!" Serena couldn't help but say in admiration.

"Sple, splendifowl, sple!" Splendifowl happily cawed. [I know! I'm so fabulous! Just wait until Syrentide sees me!]

"I'm very happy with your evolution, Splendifowl. Unfortunately, we will have to celebrate it later. We still haven't found Tiko nor any of the missing people," Ash reminded.

"Lu, luxray, ra!" Luxray warned once again. [I'm seeing some cocooned humans! They're far away, on a lower level!]

"Well done, Luxray! Lead the way!" Clemont praised the Gleam Eyes Pokemon.

They expected the lower levels of the Anthell to be even darker, but much to their surprise, it was the opposite, as many bioluminescent mushrooms grew on these tunnels, providing some light that, even if it gave the place an even more eerie feel, it at least helped with visibility.

Even if they had defeated the first wave of insects, the Anthell still had plenty more to throw at them, as they found no shortage of Bug-type Pokemon getting in the way, throwing themselves at them in an attempt to hinder their progress, while many of them also coming from behind. And as they descended towards the Anthell's lower levels, the number of bugs did nothing but increase.

[Protect the hive!]

[The Queen must not be harmed!]

[Food! More food for the Queen!]

"Who is this queen they keep talking about...?" Clemont wondered.

"We can care about that later! Focus on the battle!" Ash told his bespectacled friend.

Clemont didn't argue and began directing his Pokemon. Quilladin countered a Poison Jab from a Harylect with an Iron Head, sending the Shock Spider Pokemon tumbling backwards, while Luxray took down a pair of Sponaree and several Sponee with Wild Charge like a bowling ball knocking down a group of pins.

Splendifowl countered a pair of Incinerate from a pair of Firoke with Gust, while Frosthra covered him with Protect from the Shockwave of a nearby Harylect.

Delphox continued to roast with Flamethrower scores of Sponee and Tricwe trying to get close by crawling through the walls, while Sylveon pushed a pair of Tricwe away with Fairy Wind.

Quilladin used his Vine Whip to wrap a Sponaree and launch it against a pair of Smore, but that left him wide open for a Firoke's X-Scissor. The attack pushed Quilladin away from the group, before a Smore and a Sponee latched onto his body and sunk their jaws, glowing with a greenish-yellow light, into his flesh, likely using Leech Life.

"Qui, qui, quilla!" Quilladin screamed, as he weakly trashed around, trying to get rid of the bugs. [Help! Help! Please get them away from me!]

"Quilladin!" Clemont shouted, as he grabbed another pokeball.
"Eletux, use Aqua Jet on that Firoke! Luxray, Swift on the Pokemon

latching onto Quilladin, quickly!"

"Ele, ele!" [Worry not, leave it to me!] the playful Hippocampus Pokemon cried, before coating himself in water and slamming into the Smoking Ant Pokemon with the force of a missile.

"Lux! Lux-RAY!" [It will be done! Hang on Quilladin!] Luxray cried as he waved his tail, releasing a flurry of golden stars that homed onto the pair of Bug-types sucking his life out, while leaving Quilladin untouched.

Once Quilladin was free, Luxray quickly went to check on his fallen comrade, followed by Clemont.

"Qui... !" he cried. [It hurts...]

"You've done enough, Quilladin. Take some rest," Clemont gently said, as he recalled his mid-stage Grass-type starter.

"We're almost done with those here, but I'm hearing more of those bugs coming from some of the tunnels we left behind!" Serena warned.

"Then we should better block the entrances of those tunnels as we advance!" Ash decided, as he ran towards the closets of such entrances. "Frosthra, create an ice barrier here with Blizzard!"

"Fro, frosthra!" Frosthra enthusiastically replied. [One ice barrier coming in!]

Frosthra began to flap his wings, blowing a powerful and extremely cold wind. Solid ice began to build around the floor, walls and ice, quickly closing in, until it formed a barrier that completely plugged the tunnel.

"Good. That should keep them busy for a few minutes, at the very least," Ash deduced, before looking at Clemont. "Clemont, ask

Luxray how much until we get to the chamber where the cocooned humans are being kept!"

Ash asked the question loud enough that Clemont didn't need to relay it. Luxray looked into the same direction he had seen the cocooned victims before, and switched to X-ray vision. He opened his eyes widely in surprise.

"Lu, ray, luxray lu!" Luxray said in a rather agitated voice. [Some of the insects are moving the humans to another chamber! They must know that we're here to rescue them!]

They continued their trek through the Anthell, battling hordes of bugs that seemed to have no end. From time to time, their Pokemon would create a barrier to plug the tunnels in order to keep the bugs coming from behind and to keep them busy for some time. Aside from the humans, Clemont also asked Luxray to direct them towards other food stockpiles with cocooned Pokemon that they could free, which quickly ran away to the Anthell's exit once liberated.

As they pressed on, the tunnel started to become progressively wider, allowing them more room to battle.

"I think there's enough space to send a third Pokemon," Ash said, a pokeball already in hand. "Dunsparce, I choose you!"

"Good idea! Come out, Syrentide!" Serena said, sending her Water and Fairy-type.

"Nucleon, go!" Clemont said, as the pure Nuclear-type materialized next to him.

"Lux, luxray, ray-lux!" Luxray warned once again, his eyes glowing red. [I'm seeing the cocooned humans! They're bringing them to a gigantic chamber!]

"We need to save them as soon as possible! Come on guys, keep pushing forward!" Ash urged.

As they rushed ahead, they continued fighting their way through the hordes of insects. Dunsparce cleared the way of a group of Tricwe and Smore with a well aimed Rollout, while Splendifowl blew away a Sponaree and a pair of Sponee with Gust.

Delphox tried to slow down the bugs by erecting a wall of flames between the enemy and her friends, but it was quickly put out by the Sponaree and Sponee's Water Gun and Bubble Beam. Still, it kept the insects distracted enough for Eletux to fry them with a well placed Thunderbolt.

Then, another crackling noise, as Eletux's body glowed with a blueish-white light, and started to grow and change.

"Another evolution?" Serena asked.

Once the transformation was over, there stood a proud Electruxo. He shot a taunting look at Luxray, and while the Gleam Eyes Pokemon appeared to be unamused, he smirked back at the newly evolved Water and Electric-type.

"With all these fighting we're doing, it's not rare that some of our Pokemon might end up evolving," Clemont said, pushing his glasses up.

"And there's still a lot of fighting left to do. Come on!" Ash urged.

As Ash and his friends broke into the chamber, they were met by a veritable army of insects of all six kinds of Pokemon they had seen so far, filling the chamber with a loud cacophony of screeches, buzzes and clicking noises. Behind them were four cocoons that, judging by their shape, were clearly ensnared humans.

"There are so many of them..." Serena said, somewhat fearfully, as she looked at the swarm of angry Bug-types, daring them to make a move.

"No matter how many of them there are, we will fight them! We can't leave Tiko and the others here!" Ash stated.

"Pi-pika!" Pikachu agreed.

"I'll attack first, you guys follow my lead!" Ash began, as he took a step forward. "Splendifowl, clear a path with Gust! Dunsparce, bombard them with Ancient Power! And Frosthra-"

However, before Ash could issue the last order, something happened. Suddenly, the clattering of jaws and buzzing noises filling the air came to a halt, replaced by a deafening silence. The bugs began to look around, nervous and even fearful, before they broke their formation and scurried away in every direction. Some of them even ran past the trainers and their Pokemon, almost as if they weren't even there. After a couple seconds, the chamber was completely empty.

"What... what happened?" Clemont asked, as he looked back, seeing the last of the fleeing Bug-types disappearing behind a nearby tunnel. "Why did they run away? Because I have the feeling that we didn't scare them that much..."

"We can worry about that later. Let's take advantage of that to get the people out of those cocoons!" Ash stated.

"Yes!" Both Clemont and Serena said.

Each of them quickly went to tear the cocoons trapping one of the people. The one Ash opened had a middle aged bald man with a mustache. Clemont's had a brown haired woman in her thirties, while Serena's had a redheaded girl not that older than them.

Ash went to release the last victim of their cocoon: a dark skinned man with short hair styled in cornrows, wearing nothing but a red skirt.

"Ughh..." unlike the other three, the man in question began to groan as his body stirred. "Where... where I... UGH!"

The man tried to get up, but he was so weak he fell on his butt.

"Easy there," Ash warned, helping the man to sit down. "It's okay. You're safe now."

"I... I see..." the man groggily replied.

"You're Tiko, right?" Ash asked.

The man nodded. "How do... do you... know me? I don't... I don't remember meeting... you..."

"The pokeballs on your skirt and the Keystone on your necklace," Ash pointed out.

"Very... clever. Where I am?" the man, Tiko finally managed to articulate.

"In the Anthell," Serena replied.

This seemed to help wake the man up. "In the Anthell?" he repeated. "Just... but... how long have I... how were you able to reach this place? Where are all the bugs?" he looked at them incredulously. "Did you defeat all of them?"

"That's the funny part, we were about to fight a gigantic group of bugs guarding this place when they suddenly ran away for some reason," Ash explained. "Anyway, can you walk? Because we better not risk our luck by staying here longer than we need. Those bugs might change their minds and come back-"

THOOM!

Everybody heard a loud noise coming from below that made the ground shake a little.

"What... what was that?" Clemont asked.

"You said... the bugs ran away?" Tiko said, blinking a little. Then, he began to look around the massive chamber, and as if realizing something, his eyes grew wide with shock. "We need to leave right now! We're in grave danger!"

THOOM!

Another pulse that made the ground tremble.

"Why? What's going on?" Ash asked.

"We can't leave just now! These people are still unconscious!" Serena pointed at the other three victims.

THOOM!

This time, the quake was more intense.

"Does it have to do with these strange seismic pulses?" Clemont asked.

THOOM!

"Too late. She's already here," Tiko said with the tone of somebody who had accepted he was doomed.

"She? Who is she?" Ash asked.

The answer came in the form of the ground of the chamber exploding, raising a cloud of smoke and sending chunks of earth and rock everywhere, followed by the shape of something gigantic emerging from it.

"SKREEEEEEEEEEEE! SKREEEEEEEEEEEE!" a deafening screech echoed through the chamber.

This appeared to be a Pokemon, as the PST caught the loud noise and translated it:

[OUTSIDERS! YOU DARE BREAK INTO MY HIVE, ATTACK MY SERVANTS, AND DEFILE THE ROYAL CHAMBER WITH YOUR PRESENCE!? YOUR DEATHS SHALL BE SLOW AND PAINFUL!]

When the cloud of dust settled, they could finally see what had come from underground, and all three of them, even Ash, paled at the sight before them. Even the Pokemon cried in horror. Some like Luxray or Delphox held their ground, but others like Frosthra or Sylveon whimpered while taking a step back.

"DUNSPARCE!?" Dunsparce loudly asked. [JUST WHAT THE *BLEEP* IS THAT!?!]

It was another Bug-type Pokemon, except this one was so massive, she completely blocked the chamber's only exit by standing in front of it. Her body was dark brown, eight meters long and extremely fat. She had a mane of hair running down her back split into several sections, each colored red, yellow and blue, three pair of legs, one pair red, other yellow and other blue, and three pair of Yanma-like translucent blue wings on her back, but they were so small in comparison to her body that it was unlikely she could use them to fly. Lastly, her head had six red eyes and a pair of red antennae with yellow fluff.

"The Seikamater, the Queen of the Anthell," Tiko explained,

"Seikamater...?" Ash asked, quickly pulling his Pokedex, hoping it would give him something useful about the giant, bloated bug.

" *Seikamater, the Insect Queen Pokemon. Bug/Normal. This Legendary Pokemon is the Queen of all bugs in Tandor. She lurks deep within the Anthell, sleeping for years in between broods.*" The Pokedex explained.

"Le-Legendary!?" Serena repeated, her voice cracking with terror.

Ash was disappointed upon seeing no more data, before quickly pocketing the device away. Then again, if this was a Legendary Pokemon, then no wonder there was very little information about her.

"Ash... what are we going to do?" Serena asked, unable to take her eyes off of the monstrous Bug and Normal-type.

"Because I don't think she'll let us go if we just ask her nicely," Clemont said.

"It isn't obvious? We do what we've been doing since we came to this place: fight!" Ash said, as he leveled a glare full of resolve at the enemy in front of him.

"SKREEEEEEEEEEEE!" the Seikamater screeched again. [FIGHT OR NOT, YOUR FATE CANNOT BE CHANGED! YOU'LL DIE FOR YOUR IMPUDENCE! YOUR CARCASSES WILL FEED ME AND MY YOUNG!]

"We'll see about that!" Ash defiantly replied, leveling the massive Insect Queen a glare full of resolve.

"Pika, chu!" Pikachu added with as much energy.

Electric sparks started to jump from Seikamater's antennae as if they were a taser, before firing a massive electric blast, likely a Thunder, at the raven haired boy.

"ASH!" Serena and Clemont screamed in unison.

Thankfully, the attack never reached him, since despite his apparent fear, Frosthra threw himself between the attack and his trainer and blocked it with Protect. There was a booming noise as the electric blast crashed into the shield, before splitting into millions of yellow sparks that quickly disappeared.

"Well done Frosthra, now counter with Blizzard! Splendifowl, Air Cutter! Dunsparce, Ancient Power!" Ash shouted.

Seikamater was blasted by a powerful barrage of cold wind and sharp ice shards, a rain of golden rocks and blades of compressed air. The Insect Queen Pokemon let out a screech of agony as she tumbled backwards, before she exhaled a wide torrent of flames from her jaws.

"Syrentide, Hydro Pump!" Serena ordered.

"Help her with Water Gun, Electruxo!" Clemont added.

Both the Siren Pokemon and the Hippocampus Pokemon fired streams of water from their mouth, the former way larger than the later, at the incoming wall of flames. There was a sizzling noise followed by a cloud of steam as the two opposing elements clashed, but much to their horror, they realized that Seikamater's fire attack was overpowering their water ones, until the two Pokemon were engulfed by the flames.

"Syrentide!" Serena cried.

"Electruxo!" Clemont shouted as well.

Retribution came in the form of Delphox sending a Fire Blast and Nucleon firing a beam of radioactive power from his chest orb. Her big size and slow movements made Seikamater all but impossible to dodge the moves, which once again made her screech in pain and tumble back a little, but so far it didn't look like the damage was significant.

Once the flames of Seikamater's attack disappeared, Serena and Clemont could see much to their relief that Syrentide and Electruxo only had a few burns. Even if they weren't able to completely stop her attack, they had weakened it significantly.

"Tiko, you're a Gym Leader, aren't you going to help us?" Ash asked.

"I'd gladly help you fight her, but all my Pokemon are down for the count," the Gym Leader regretfully replied.

Seikamater proved to have a far wider arsenal than any Bug-type Pokemon had any right to have, as she began to form a large sphere of darkness in front of her face, before launching it at Syrentide and Electruxo.

"Splendifowl, intercept it!" Ash quickly ordered.

The Paradise Bird Pokemon quickly dived towards the giant Shadow Ball, blocking it with his body. However, no matter their size or power, no Ghost-type attack could harm a Normal-type pokemon like Splendifowl, and the sphere of darkness burst like a balloon once it exhausted all its energy trying to get past the insurmountable wall that was the blue bird.

"Sy, Syren!" Syrentide smiled and waved at him. [Nice save! I owe you one!]

Splendifowl turned his head back at her and smiled. "Sple, fow-RAAAAAARK!" the bird squawked in pain as he was blasted by electricity.

"Splendifowl!" Ash yelled.

Unfortunately for the bird, the moment he let his feelings for Syrentide get the best of him gave Seikamater an opportunity to fry him with another Thunder. Needless to say, such a devastating attack knocked Splendifowl out cold, as he fell to the ground with a loud thud.

"Splendifowl!" Ash repeated again, as he ran towards the fallen bird. His feathers were disheveled and had many burn marks, but thankfully nothing a visit to the Pokemon Center couldn't fix. With a despondent sigh, Ash returned the defeated bird to his pokeball, and took another one. "It's okay, Splendifowl. Take a rest. Greninja, I choose you!"

As Splendifowl was absorbed into the capture device, Greninja was released to take his place. The Ninja Pokemon took a fighting

stance, ready to battle, but his normally unflappable stoicism was shaken when he saw the kind of enemy they were facing.

"Ni-ninja!?" Greninja asked, blinking a couple times. [W-What is that!?!]

"Pi, pikachu!" Pikachu replied. [Something big and ugly who wants to kill us all! Just hit her hard!]

"We need to go all out if we hope to defeat that Pokemon!" Serena said, holding her Mega Ring above her head, before touching it with her other hand. "Syrentide, let me help you bring out the potential that hides deep within you! Mega Evolve!"

Tendrils of light shot from both the Keystone and the Mega Stone, merging together forming a link between trainer and Pokemon. Syrentide's body glowed with a bright, blinding light as she transformed, revealing her new appearance once the light dimmed out, as the helix of the Mega Evolution briefly flashed in front of her.

"Whoa! You have Mega Evolution?" Tiko asked, marveling upon Syrentide's new form.

"All of us have it," Serena explained.

"Really? In that case we might have a better chance..." Tiko said, sounding more hopeful.

"Come on Greninja, let's do it! The only way we can defeat this enemy is TOGETHER!" Ash said, bringing his arms outwards before crossing them in front of him.

The Ninja Pokemon was engulfed by a spiraling torrent of water, which allowed everybody to see the Pokemon's silhouette as he transformed. Once the metamorphosis was complete, all the water compressed into a single Water Shuriken attached to Ash-Greninja's back.

"Hey, wait a minute! That Greninja! You're Ash Ketchum, are you?" Tiko said in realization. "I should have known! Sheldon told me that you'd come to my gym soon!"

"I'm glad you think of Ash so highly, but you'll excuse us for leaving the pleasantries for later," Serena quickly interceded, a bead of sweat rolling down her forehead.

"Oh, right, of course!" Tiko said, as he began to crawl towards the furthest part of the chamber. "I'll make sure the unconscious victims aren't caught by a stray attack or something like that."

Seikamater attacked again, this time by spewing a massive deluge of water at them, an attack all of them identified as Hydro Pump.

"Frosthra, counter it with Blizzard!" Ash ordered. "Greninja, Ice Beam!"

"Syrentide, Hyper Voice, as loud as you can!" Serena added.

"Gre!" Greninja said, firing a freezing beam from his cupped, webbed hands.

"Fro, fro, fro, froooooo!" Frosthra began to flap his wings as fast as possible in order to make his Blizzard as strong as possible.

Frosthra's Blizzard and Greninja's Ice Beam were able to freeze part of the water Seikamater was spewing, but they didn't stop the attack. Fortunately, Syrentide's Pixilate-enhanced Hyper Voice managed to provide the extra power needed, as the two attacks together were able to stop the torrent of water.

"Luxray, Wild Charge! Nucleon, Quick Attack!" Clemont ordered, as Seikamater was now wide open.

The two Pokemon dashed forward, Luxray covered in a thick coat of lightning, Nucleon glowing with a bright green light as he left a trail of fading light of the same color, before leaping at the giant insect.

Luxray smashed into her first, producing a blast of electricity that made her tumble backwards, followed by Nucleon's Atomizate-enhanced attack, pushing her back even further.

Letting out an angry, ear-piercing screech - that the PST didn't translate, meaning it was just a screech - Seikamater went onto the offensive again, this time with another Thunder.

"Delphox, repel it with Fire Blast!" Serena ordered.

"Dunsparce, help her with Ancient Power!" Ash added.

"Nucleon, Gamma Ray, now!" Clemont shouted.

Delphox aimed her wand at the incoming electric barrage, releasing a large wall of flame shaped like the kanji of fire, while Dunsparce threw a salvo of golden, glowing rocks that he summoned around him, and Nucleon once again fired a green energy beam from his small chest orb. The three attacks clashed against the monstrous Thunder, and even if they weren't able to overcome it, they were able to stop it on its tracks.

"Hey, I'm noticing something about Seikamater..." Ash said, looking at the royal bug's head, way above him. "All her attacks... they always come from either the head or the mouth.."

As if to prove Ash's theory right, Seikamater's antennae crackled with energy, this time orange instead of yellow, as energy particles of the same color began to gather and form into a growing orb of energy. Ash tensed up, immediately recognizing the attack, and given Clemont and Serena's reaction, so had they.

"Everybody, move! That's a Hyper Beam!" Clemont warned.

Before they had the chance to put up or even think in a defense, Seikamater fired the beam in a wide arc, forcing everybody to run away in any direction. The destructive beam of energy carved a

furrow as it moved, and while all the humans and most Pokemon were able to dodge it, some of them weren't so lucky.

The first victim was Dunsparce, who wanted to avoid the beam by digging underground, but he didn't dig deep enough, and the energy stream caught him underground, blasting him into the air.

"PAAAAAAAARCE!" Dunsparce screamed as he fell.

"Dunsparce!" Ash cried.

And sadly for them, Dunsparce wouldn't be the first victim the Hyper Beam would claim.

"DEEEEEEL!" Delphox cried as she was caught by the blast, much to Serena, Sylveon and Syrentide's horror.

"CLEOOOO!" Nucleon screamed in pain as well, as he was unable to dodge the light of destruction.

"Delphox, no!" Serena shouted, as she rushed towards her fallen Pokemon.

"Nucleon!" Clemont yelled, also running towards his defeated Nuclear-type.

As Ash recalled Dunsparce and his friends did the same for their fallen Pokemon, Ash noticed that Seikamater took a step back, her body sagging, looking like she was feeling exhausted all of sudden. Ash had seen Hyper Beam enough times to know that a Pokemon that used it would need a few moments to recover before it could use another attack or even move, and Legendary or not Seikamater wasn't an exception.

It was now their chance to put an end to this.

"Frosthra, String Shot on Seikamater! Aim at her face!"

"Fro, fros!" Frosthra chirped, nodding. [Ohhhh, that's a good idea, sensei!]

Taking advantage of Seikamater's predicament, Frosthra flew close to the Insect Queen Pokemon's face and wasted no time firing sticky webbing from his mouth. He aimed for her eyes first, blinding her, then he tied her antennae, and lastly tied her jaws shut.

As the negative aftereffect of the Hyper Beam passed, Seikamater could move and attack again, but with her eyes disabled and her antennae and jaws stuck together, she had no way to attack. She trashed violently around as she attempted to remove the sticky substance from her face with her front legs, *attempted* being the key word since said legs were too short to reach.

"Everybody, attack now! This is our chance!" Ash urged his friends. "Frosthra, Signal Beam! Greninja, Water Shuriken!"

"Syrentide, Hydro Pump! Sylveon, Moonblast!" Serena ordered.

"Luxray, Swift! And Electruxo, Thunderbolt!" Clemont followed.

Seikamater was bombarded by a beam of bright light, a spinning water disk, a torrential stream of water, a pink and white energy missile, a loud lightning bolt and a barrage of golden stars. All attacks found their mark, exploding at different spots on Seikamater's body. It seemed that, between all the previous damage sustained across the battle, Seikamater had reached her limit, given that her four back legs gave in, her body collapsing on the ground.

It seemed that one of the attacks had destroyed the sticky threads wrapped around Seikamater's face, given that the wrapping had come undone and the Insect Queen Pokemon could see and screech again.

"SKREEEEEEEEEEEE! SKREEEEEEEEEEEE!" she screeched. Unlike her previous cries, this one wasn't filled with rage, but with fear and

desperation. [SERVANTS, TO ME! YOUR QUEEN IS BEING ATTACKED! PROTECT YOUR QUEEN, PROTECT THE HIVE!]

And with that, Seikamater dug underground, abandoning the battle.

"We won?" Clemont asked, blinking a couple times, before breaking out a jubilant smile. "Yes, we did it! We took down that Legendary Pokemon!"

Unfortunately, Clemont's jubilation would prove to be short-lived, as Pikachu's ears perked up.

"Pi, pika, pikachu pi!" Pikachu warned, his tone gaining an edge of urgency. [The rest of the bugs are coming back! We need to move!]

"Guys, help me carry these people!" Tiko said from the further end of the chamber, as he tried to lift the half-cocooned body of the unconscious woman.

Wasting no time, they placed one of the bodies on Luxray's back, had Greninja carry another, and Ash and Clemont carried the third one. After that, they recalled all their inactive Pokemon to carry the unconscious people.

"Come on, let's get out of here!" Ash said.

"Luxray, can you find the way back?" Clemont asked his strongest Pokemon.

"Lu, luxray, lux!" Luxray replied as he nodded. [I am, boss. Follow my lead!]

The group and their human cargo ran out of the chamber back into the vast network of tunnels. They would have spent many hours looking for the entrance in that maze, but thanks to Luxray's X-ray vision they knew what path they had to follow.

Soon, members of the Anthell's swarm appeared to stop them from leaving. Ash sent Metalynx, while Clemont sent Bunnelby and

Serena sent Pangoro in order to face them. Their Queen's defeat had sent them into a frenzied state, and the PST wasn't even able to translate what their high pitched buzzes and screeches even meant anymore. Not that anything they had to say mattered.

Bunnelby smacked a pair of Smore away with a well timed Double Slap, while Pangoro's Thunder Punch sent a Sponaree careening backwards, and Metalynx's Iron Tail parried a X-Scissor from a bold Harylect, before delivering a Night Slash in return.

While their numbers grew with each passing moment, their collective fighting style was just as disorganized and chaotic as it had been before, meaning that the humans and their Pokemon didn't have that much trouble dealing with them. Still, with every foe they felled, their Pokemon grew a little more exhausted. If they didn't find the exit anytime soon...

But alas, luck was on their side.

"I feel an air current... we're close to one of the exits!" Serena said, the thought renewing her strength, if only temporarily.

"Yes! Right up ahead! I'm seeing it!" Tiko said.

As they run, a veritable tide of frenzied Bug-type Pokemon poured behind them, the angry swarm undeterred in its chase of the invaders.

"We can't run as fast while carrying someone! They're going to catch us!" Clemont panicked, as he constantly looked back, only to see the swarm closer and closer.

"Forget about them! Keep running! Focus on reaching the exit!" Ash urged him.

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu said, as he leaped out of Ash's shoulder. [Don't worry, leave them to me!"]

"Wait- Pikachu? What are you doing!?" Ash shouted, as he turned his head back and saw his starter Pokemon gathering electricity.
"Pikachu, NO!"

"Pika... CHUUUUUUUUUU!" Pikachu yelled, as he released a powerful Thunderbolt towards the coming swarm.

Pikachu's attack had knocked out multiple Bug-type at once, their unconscious bodies forming a partial plug that severely hindered the movement of the swarm. However, this maneuver didn't come without a cost, as the moment Pikachu landed on all four, his legs began to wobble as if they were made of jelly, before collapsing on the ground.

"Pika..." Pikachu weakly cried.

"Pikachu!" Ash said, dropping the legs of the unconscious person he was carrying, as he rushed back to pick up the electric mouse. Once he was with him, Ash put Pikachu on his shoulder before going back to help Clemont with the unconscious victim they were carrying.
"Pikachu, why did you do that!? You're far from being fully recovered!"

Pikachu didn't say anything.

Pikachu's reckless action may have earned him his trainer's anger, but it did manage to buy the group enough time to reach the exit and leave the hellish bug lair.

"Syrentide, close the entrance of that tunnel with Ice Beam, quickly!" Serena said, sending her Water-type a second time.

"You too, Greninja!" Ash mimicked her.

The Siren and Ninja Pokemon fired twin beams of white, freezing power, and in a few seconds the entrance of the tunnel was plugged by a large block of ice.

"Well done!" Tiko said, patting the chunk of ice a couple times. "It looks solid enough. This should be able to buy us enough of a head start so that by the time the bugs destroy it we will be too far away for them to track us."

"Will they chase us outside of their lair?" Ash asked.

"Normally no, but with how they are right now... better not press our luck," Tiko said, scratching the back of his head, as he looked at the ice block with a hint of uneasiness. "Let's get going."

...

Thankfully, they only took a few minutes to wake up the other three people that had been kidnapped by the bugs. After that, they let several of their Pokemon out to act both as vanguards, to deter possible wild Pokemon eager to pick a fight from doing so - the attack of the Mankey and Primeape troop was still fresh in their minds - and to help them carry said people.

So far, they proved to be a good deterrent.

Coatlith also proved to be especially useful in that endeavor, as the Forest Lord (Lady?) Pokemon was able to carry three people with ease while hovering above them, relieving the smaller Pokemon of a big burden and keeping said people away from potential danger.

As they walked back to Amatree, Tiko explained to them the intricacies of the Anthell: normally, while territorial, the bugs of the Anthell tended to mind their own business as long as one stayed away from their lair. They simply collected the rapid growing berries from Baykal, which were more than enough to feed the entire hive, without driving other Pokemon to starvation.

The problem was the Seikamater, their queen. Seikamater spented most of the time hibernating, but once every couple years she wakes up to lay eggs, and then take control of the hive mind to send her workers into a food collecting frenzy. The Seikamater's hunger was

so big that they collected every berry from the trees close to their lair, forcing other Pokemon to move away ("so that's why Quetzoral's memory of the Mankey and the Primeape's territory didn't match with what they claimed!" Ash said in realization).

The worst part, though, was that sometimes berries weren't enough, so the bugs also caught Pokemon and even people to feed their queen.

"Though, thanks to the spanking you guys gave her, I feel she'll be going back into hibernation soon, so we won't have to worry for another couple years. Or so I think. Scientists didn't have much a chance to study the Anthell and Seikamater, since the place is so dangerous." Tiko said. Then, he produced a transparent vial from a pocket on his skirt, filled with a thick, orange liquid. "However, this may put an end to it!"

"What's that?" Serena asked, taking a closer look at the vial.

"I believe this is no less than Seikamater's Royal Jelly!" Tiko proudly said. "I found it in a puddle while you guys were fighting the Seikamater. People in the past were able to gather some, but never more than a few drops at a time. But this whole vial will help us understand the Seikamater and her brood all that better!"

"Really? That's great!" Clemont cheered. "Not only did we save people and Pokemon today, but we've done a big service to science!"

"Yep! Once we get to Amatree, I'll be mailing this to a friend of mine who works at Professor Cypress' laboratory," Tiko said, pocketing the vial back. Then, he looked at Ash and with a huge smile, said: "And once my Pokemon are back in top shape, we'll have our Gym match. And honestly, after seeing you in action, I'm very eager to test you myself."

"Haha, yes!" Ash pumped his fist. "I can't wait to battle you either!"

And thus, while tired and bruised, the group made their way back to Amatre more reinvigorated than ever, not only for the heroic deed that they had accomplished a few hours ago, but for what was to come as well.

Author's Note: I think it was obvious that Ash and co. would return to the Anthell, wasn't it? But hey, the worst has already passed. The Anthell has been cleared and Tiko and the rest of the disappeared people are safe and sound! Yay!

Yeah, lots of evolutions here, with Frosthra, Splendifowl and Electruxo reaching their final forms. But hey, they have been fighting a lot of Pokemon in a very short amount of time. Originally Frosthra was also going to evolve there, but three evolutions broke the fast paced action too often, so I moved it to an evolution during training (also to foreshadow that some Pokemon will evolve during training in the future).

I hope you enjoyed both the action filled trek through the Anthell (even if Ash and co. definitely did not) as well as the battle against the Seikamater. Garlikid already showed that it could easily face two Mega Evolved Pokemon, and Seikamater upped the ante even more.

Thanks a lot to hirowriter, Lipeghoul, MegaSalamence64, Fox McCloude, MarcusDarkus87 and Brightnova169 for reviewing last chapter, and special thanks to Viroro-kun for beta reading this chapter, retaking his role of the story's official beta after last chapter's absence.

Next time, Ash finally gets to face Tiko, and finds out why he's West Tandor's toughest leader (despite his less than stellar performance in the Anthell). Until then, don't forget to drop a review!

A Dance for Three

Chapter 43:

A Dance for Three

Amatree Town

"CANNONBAAAAAALL!" Bonnie yelled, before her body, curled into a ball, hit the water with a small splash.

It had been two days after their trip to the Anthell, where they had rescued Tiko as well as three other people they had disappeared into the nightmarish bug nest. Once they returned to the town, after getting past the crowd that surrounded and cheered them for returning their beloved Gym Leader, both the teens and the Gym Leader had taken their Pokemon to the Pokemon Center - where Bonnie was still waiting, much to Clemont's relief - in order to heal them up. While the teens' Pokemon would only take a few hours to get them back in shape, Tiko's Pokemon would need more time.

Not that the Gym Leader minded, since the experience had left him beyond exhausted, and could use the time to recover as well.

"Once me and my Pokemon are ready, I'll give you a call to warn you that both the Gym and its Leader are back in business," Tiko had assured Ash after they both exchanged pokegear numbers. "In the meantime, maybe you could use some rest as well. Amatree has plenty of interesting spots to have a great time!"

And so they did. For the last two days, their routine was getting up, some light training, lunch and rest, more training in the afternoon, and lastly Ash and Serena going on a date to a new restaurant.

For today's activity before the afternoon training, Serena had heard that, following the river up that crossed the town, there was a lake with a beautiful waterfall on it. It was also a popular spot for people

and Pokemon to take a bath and have some fun. So they got there, changed into their swimsuits, released all their Pokemon and jumped into the lake.

And it wasn't just the humans, but many of the Pokemon were also having fun in the water, each in their own way. Needless to say, every child bathing on the lake was quickly drawn to the Pokemon, who happily agreed to play with them such as Pikachu, Metalynx, Frosthra, Electruxo, Quilladin and Bunnelby. Putting some distance from the racket, Sylveon and Nucleon were swimming together, while Pangoro was sitting on the edge of the small lake, his back and shoulders resting on a smooth rock, and Greninja meditated under the waterfall.

And while Dunsparce tended to spent moments like this alone and napping, the Land Snake Pokemon appeared to be brimming with energy today, constantly leaping into the water from increasingly higher points.

"Here I come!" Ash said, having climbed to the same spot as Bonnie before. "Splendifowl, you ready?"

"Sple, fowl!" Splendifowl, perched on a branch above Ash, whistled in affirmation.

"In that case... " Ash said, as he jumped feet first into the water.

And just as he did, Splendifowl dived at Ash, the teen grabbing the bird by his talons. Splendifowl began to fly in circles around the lake, as both people and Pokemon below watched them in awe. After a couple minutes, Splendifowl lowered his altitude before releasing Ash into the water.

"Awesome, Splendifowl!" Ash cheered as he emerged from under the water.

"Sple.. splen..." Splendifowl said, a little winded, as he went to rest to a nearby branch.

"Whoa, that was so cool!" Bonnie said with stars in her eyes. "I want Splendifowl to carry me too!"

"I'm sure he'd love to, but you should let him rest a little bit," Ash told Bonnie.

"Fro, frosthra, fros!" Frosthra excitedly hovered over them, Ash already guessing that he had heard them.

"... but it seems that Frosthra is willing to give you a ride," Ash said.

"You would, Frosthra?" Bonnie asked, and upon seeing the Frost Moth Pokemon happily nodded, Bonnie cheered. "Thank you Frosthra! You're the best!"

"Though, you'll have to wait your turn Bonnie," Serena said, having climbed to the same spot where Bonnie had jumped off. "You better watch this! Syrentide, are you ready?"

"Sy, syren!" Syrentide, just below her, nodded before diving.

With astonishing grace, Serena jumped headfirst into the lake, landing on the same spot Syrentide was only a couple seconds ago. Then, Serena was shot out of the water and into the air by a geyser of water, standing completely on balance as the water moved up, before it revealed Syrentide, firing a Hydro Pump upwards. Once it was over, Serena jumped into the water, allowing her Water and Fairy-type Pokemon to stop the attack.

"Great job, Syrentide!" Serena thanked her Pokemon, who nodded before swimming away. The teen girl then turned towards Ash and Bonnie. "So, what do you think?"

"It was amazing! The way you were standing on top of that stream of water... !" Ash excitedly said. "It's a pity you won't be able to do that in a contest, though..."

"No, but I will be able to use it when I return to Kalos and go back to showcases," Serena said, winking at him.

"Ah, yes, well thought!" Ash agreed.

As Bonnie went to climb the jumping spot next to the waterfall, Ash and Serena stayed there, floating in the water and looking at each other. And while Ash was a man of action who hated staying still, he was oddly relaxed. He felt he could stay there, gently rocked by the small ripples made by other people and Pokemon in the lake, looking at Serena.

"I always thought that Serena was pretty, but... was she always this pretty?" he thought.

Serena, however, began to blush as she looked away. "Um, Ash-"

But before the girl could say anything, they were interrupted by a beeping noise coming from Ash's pokegear.

"Uh, somebody sent me a text," Ash said. Opening it up, Ash's face lit up upon reading the message. "It's Tiko! He said both he and his Pokemon are back to full health, and that I can fight him when I'm ready!"

"And let me guess, that moment is now, isn't it?" Serena asked, giggling a little.

"You know it!" Ash said, as he began to swim towards the edge of the lake. "I'm sorry I have to cut everybody's fun short, but there's a badge begging me to win it!"

...

Even if he had been told there wouldn't be any problems this time around, Ash couldn't help but let out a little sigh of relief upon seeing that the gate that previously blocked his path to the Gym was now open. The path towards the Gym cut through the middle of a dense

forest, the canopy of the trees completely blocking the light of the sun, with only the lit tiki torches that flanked the path providing some light.

"Boy, Tiko really likes being dramatic, does he?" Bonnie asked, taking a closer look at one of the tiki torches.

"He knows how to pump potential challengers, that's for sure," Ash said.

Eventually, the path led to a large clearing in the forest where the Gym seemed to be. "Seemed", since rather than a modern building, in front of them rose a mighty temple made of stone, probably several centuries old. Despite numerous cracks in the stone and ivy plants and moss growing over it, the exterior looked clean and well maintained. A pair of flags with the Pokemon League symbol in front of the entrance being the only cues that they didn't get lost and arrived at the place in question.

Wordlessly, the four teens crossed a pair of stone columns, decorated with beautiful carvings of Coatlich, and stepped inside, walking into a large stone chamber. Inside said chamber was a brown skinned woman working with a computer on a wooden desk, a vision that contrasted rather sharply with the antiquity of the place.

"Oh, hello!" the receptionist said upon noticing the teens. "I assume one of you is Ash Ketchum?"

"That would be me," Ash said, raising a hand.

"Excellent. Tiko was expecting you. He's already waiting for you in the main battleground," the receptionist said, smiling pleasantly. "Just follow this hallway behind me. You can't miss it."

"Thank you, miss," Ash said, as he and his friends did what she was told.

As the group crossed the hallway, they saw that the walls had murals painted on them. Many of them depicted Coatlich in several situations, the most common was being worshiped. It also appeared fighting against another Pokemon, one that looked like a cross between a bird and a dragon with three legs, surrounded by thunderstorms.

"People in this temple were huge fans of Coatlich, weren't they?" Serena asked, her mind no doubt going to her recently evolved Pokemon. "They almost treat them as Legendary Pokemon."

"The Pokedex did say that the ancient people of Baykal used to worship them," Clemont reminded her. "Maybe they did believe they were legendary Pokemon."

Eventually, they reached the end of the hallway, which much to their confusion led to a completely dark chamber.

"Huh? What's with this place?" Bonnie asked. "I can't see anything!"

"Neither can I," Clemont said. "Oh well, nothing that the Heliolisk Lantern can't-"

But it wasn't necessary, as a multitude of brasiers and torches were suddenly lit at once with multiple flashes of orange, revealing the battleground inside the stone chamber. In front of the battleground was Tiko, holding a pair of staves with their ends on fire, and flanking the sides were two rows of people with drums, wearing the same orange and red skirt as Tiko, the men also being shirtless while the women wearing tops decorated with red feathers.

"Uh, hello!" Ash said, scratching his cheek. "I'm here to-"

Ash was interrupted when the people manning the drums began to beat them to a fast paced rhythm. Then, Tiko began to dance while twirling his twin staves, expertly moving so he wouldn't end up burning himself. As the rhythm became faster, so did Tiko's dance, as he began to toss the staves into the air while executing complex

jumps and spins, catching them once they fell down to the floor. Ash and his friends were so impressed by the spectacle and skill Tiko was displaying, they even forgot for a moment why they were here.

With one last final beat from the drums, Tiko's dance came to an end. All the drummers began to move towards a set of bleachers that had been built in front of the battleground, while two of them walked towards Tiko.

"Welcome, Ash Ketchum," Tiko said, as he handed his staves to two of the drummers, who put the fires out and took them away. "What you have seen just now is a war dance the ancient people of Baykal performed before they headed to battle. And as one of their descendants, I used that dance as a way to accept your challenge for a Gym Badge!"

"Excellent! So, shall we begin?" Ash eagerly asked.

"We'll begin as soon as you're ready. Take your place at the opposite end of mine in the battleground," Tiko instructed. "Your friends can watch from the bleachers with the rest of my trainers."

Ash nodded, and handed Pikachu to Serena while she, Clemont and Bonnie headed to the spectator area.

"Good luck, Ash," Serena whispered.

"Thank you. Though I don't think I'll need it," Ash confidently replied.

...

As Serena and the Lumiose siblings took her seats, Ash and Tiko prepared for their battle.

"By the way, Ash, what do you think of my Gym?" Tiko asked.

"It's pretty unique, I'll give you that," Ash replied.

The Gym Leader chuckled. "You could call it that, yes. It used to be a temple of the ancient people who lived here, you know? Dedicated to Coatlith, whom it was believed to be a Legendary Pokemon for its power, beauty and majesty."

"My friend Serena has a Coatlith," Ash pointed out.

"She does? She might be a magnificent trainer then," Tiko said, and Serena couldn't help but feel a little bashful over a Gym Leader praising her. "Anyway, besides being a place of worship, this temple was also where the ancient Baykal warriors trained, both human and Pokemon alike. Right in this very chamber. Which is why I turned this temple into a Gym and this chamber into the battleground, as a way to honor my ancestors. And you know, when I battle here, I can sometimes feel their spirits, watching from the Great Beyond, and smiling upon seeing that their traditions are still alive, even if not unchanged."

Ash smirked. "Well, I'm afraid the spirits of your ancestors will watch you lose today."

The referee raised both her flags. "This is an official Gym Battle between the Gym Leader Tiko, and Ash Ketchum. The battle will be a Triple Battle with no time limit. The battle will be over when one side has lost all three Pokemon. No substitutions are allowed. Trainers, select your Pokemon."

"Triple battle?" Serena asked, taken aback, and even if it was very subtle, Ash's reaction also told her that he wasn't expecting such a thing. The only time she recalled such a battle was their bout against Shauna, Tierno and Trevor, but that battle involved three trainers on each side. "Is that... is that legal?"

"Pika?" Pikachu asked, seemingly sharing her worries.

"Yes," Clemont bluntly stated, his eyes fixed on both Ash and Tiko. "It's not very widespread, but the Triple Battle is a format recognized

by the Pokemon League, and thus Gym Leaders can employ it for their challengers."

"Do you know if Ash has battled with three Pokemon at once before?" Bonnie asked, holding her hands. "Because it sounds really complicated."

"It is," Clemont said. "Guess this is part of the reason behind Tiko being considered such a strong leader. If he has mastered a format most people are unfamiliar with..."

"So triple battle, huh? Sounds like fun!" Ash said, his confidence untouched, as he held two pokeballs on one hand and another on the other. "Alright, these are my picks! Greninja, Dunsparce, Splendifowl, I choose you!"

Ash tossed the pokeballs into the air, which opened and released the stoic and disciplined ninja frog, the irritable yellow snake and the jubilant blue bird.

"Gre!"

"Dun?"

"Sple, splen!"

"Your Pokemon look well trained, Ash. But mine are better! Chimaconda, Pajay, Inflagetah, time to dance!" Tiko said, mimicking Ash motion.

From the capture devices emerged three Pokemon none of them had seen before. Both Ash and Serena pulled out their Pokedex to scan them.

The first one was a large, red skinned feline, with long white fangs, a white furry mane, purple horns, purple wings, and a green snake with red rings running down its back as a tail.

" Chimaconda, the Chimera Pokemon, and Chimical's evolution. Fire/Poison. Normally passive unless provoked, Chimaconda inject their prey with a paralytic venom and then wrap it in their tails, squeezing the life out."

The second one was a large bird with mostly red feathers, with green feathers on its wings, a white beak and facial mask and long, multicolored plumes on its head and tail. A flaming aura surrounded its wings.

" Pajay, the Phoenix Pokemon, Palij's evolution and Pahar's final form. Fire/Flying. Every year, massive flocks of Pahar and Palij migrate from Tandor to the Orange Islands. A Pajay leads each one."

"Huh. I don't remember seeing that Pokemon when I was traveling the Orange Islands," Ash said before pocketing the Pokedex.

Of course, Serena shouldn't have been surprised that Ash had been there too.

The last one looked like a yellow gazelle with long horns, a red forehead, red legs, red rings around its tail, and flames across its back and back legs.

" Inflagetah, the Firebolt Pokemon. Fire. Inflagetah are some of the fastest known Pokémon on earth, able to outrun even a Rapidash. They can reach speeds up to 200 MPH."

All of them noticed the metallic collar with a red and yellow gemstone Inflagetah was wearing.

"Ash, I will always be grateful to you for saving both me and those people in the Anthell," Toko solemnly began. Then, his eyes turned sharp as he added: "But don't even think for a moment that that means I plan to go easy on you!"

Ash replied with his patented confident smirk. "I'd be sorely disappointed if you did that."

The referee lowered both flags in a chopping motion. "Begin!"

~Challenger Ash (Greninja & Dunsparce & Splendifowl) VS Gym Leader Tiko (Chimaconda & Pajay & Inflagetah)~

"Let's take the first move! Pajay, put a pretty sun up there with Sunny Day!" Tiko commanded.

"Pa, pajay!" the Phoenix Pokemon cawed in affirmation, as it spread its wings as its body was surrounded by a bright golden aura.

A second later, an artificial sun appeared above the battleground, bathing the cavernous chamber in bright light and raising the temperature.

"Good! Now, for our next step: Inflagetah, Flame Impact on Greninja, and Chimaconda, cover it with Flamethrower!" Tiko ordered.

"Chim!" Chimaconda roared, before exhaling from its jaws a huge stream of flames which were so hot, the air rippled around them.

"Everybody, dodge!" Ash urged.

Splendifowl flew up, Greninja leaped aside, while Dunsparce crawled away as fast as he could, narrowly dodging the empowered fire attack.

"FLA!"

Unfortunately, the Flamethrower wasn't the real attack. As Greninja dodged it, he was wide open for Inflagetah, and the Firebolt Pokemon, honoring its classification, slammed into the Ninja Pokemon with its body wreathed in flames at such speed, everybody only saw an orange and red blur.

"Greeeee... !" Greninja cried as he was violently launched backwards.

"Greninja!" Ash shouted. Despite being a Fire-type move, that Flame Impact had done quite a number on the Kalosian starter.

"And let's keep the pressure up with a nice Fire Blast, Pajay! And Chimaconda, Flamethrower on Pajay!" Tiko said with an arm flourish.

"On Pajay...?" Ash repeated.

As Chimaconda readied another Flamethrower, Pajay placed itself between its partner and Ash's Pokemon, taking the full blast of Chimaconda's attack. The move, however, did no visible harm to the Phoenix Pokemon, who was now glowing with a burning orange aura.

"Paaaaa-JAAAY!" Pajay screeched, before releasing a massive kanji-shaped wall of flames towards Dunsparce and Splendifowl.

"Quickly, dodge! You can't let that monstrous attack hit you!" Ash shouted, beads of sweat running down his temples. "Splendifowl, fly higher, and Dunsparce, Dig!"

"Wait, what happened? What's with that gigantic Fire Blast!? And why did Tiko have his own Pokemon attack each other!?" Bonnie asked, looking back and forth between Clemont and the battlefield.

"I'd say that Pajay's ability is Flash Fire," Clemont began. "Not only does it nullify Fire-type moves, but it increases the power of the Pokemon's own Fire-type attacks when hit by attacks of said type."

"So basically Chimaconda empowered Pajay?" Bonnie asked, before huffing and crossing her arms. "That's not fair!"

"Ash, you have to do something!" Serena shouted. "You need to attack! If all you do is dodge Tiko's attacks, you're going to lose!"

"Pi, pikachu!" Pikachu shouted as well, seemingly agreeing with Serena.

"I'm sorry Ash, but I'm the one who controls the flow of this dance!" Tiko said, making a spin. "Inflagetah, Extreme Speed on Dunsparce! Pajay, Solar Beam on Greninja, and Chimaconda, Thunder Fang on Splendifowl!"

"Oh no, you won't! You might have caught me by surprise at first, but this is where we turn around the tides of the battle! Greninja, intercept Chimaconda with Night Slash! Splendifowl, slow down Inflagetah with Gust, and Dunsparce, Ancient Power on Pajay!"

Once again, Inflagetah blitzed through the battlefield, looking like a yellow and red blur, leaving a trail of vanishing afterimages behind it. This time, though, it was unable to reach its target, as it was caught inside a powerful tornado blown by Splendifowl beating his wings with all his strength that slowed down its advance to a crawl.

"Conda!" Chimaconda roared as he leaped at the hovering Splendifowl from below, a mass of electricity pouring from its open jaws.

"NINJA!" Greninja cried, as he intercepted the jumping Chimera Pokemon with a leap of his own, and with a powerful slash of his sword of darkness, sent the Fire and Poison-type Pokemon tumbling backwards, before landing and jumping aside himself, narrowly avoiding Pajay's Solar Beam.

And as Pajay fired a destructive beam of concentrated sunlight at Ash's strongest Pokemon in battle, Dunsparce summoned a ring of golden rocks that spun above him, before launching them at the Phoenix Pokemon. The attack connected, making Pajay caw in pain and forcing it to fly back. But unfortunately the additional effect of Ancient Power wasn't triggered, despite Serene Grace.

"Yes! Well done Ash!" Serena cheered.

"Keep going like that!" Bonnie added.

"Guess there's no point in holding back any longer. You're just as strong as all the people who hyped you said, Tiko," Ash said, as he crossed his arms in front of his face. "But we're stronger! Come on Greninja, let's do it TOGETHER!"

Ash brought his arms outwards, just as Greninja was engulfed by a spiraling tower of torrential water. For a couple seconds, the battle was brought to a halt, as Greninja transformed into his enhanced form, powered by his bond with Ash. Once the transformation was over, the whirlpool condensed into the Ninja Pokemon's back, forming a water shuriken.

"So that's the famous Battle Bond Greninja, huh? I feel honored that you find me worthy of using it against my Pokemon," Tiko said, a smile of anticipation adorning his lips. "But no matter how much water your ninja frog may bring, you won't be able to put out the fire of our hearts! Pajay, another Solar Beam at Greninja!"

"Double Team, quickly!" Ash countered.

Just as Pajay fired the greenish-golden beam of solar power, dozens of Greninja copies littered the battleground, hiding the real one from the powerful Grass-type move.

"Inflagetah, get rid of those fakes with Heat Wave!" Tiko ordered.
"And Pajay, Air Slash!"

Inflagetah took a deep breath before exhaling a wide cone of burning wind, while Pajay beat its wings with all its might, producing a storm of white energy blades. The two attacks quickly covered the battleground, eliminating all the fake copies in no time.

"Great! Now Chimaconda, Hyper Voice!" Tiko commanded.

"CHIMAAAAAAA!" Chimaconda roared, sending a sonic blast towards Ash's three Pokemon, blasting them backwards before they had any chance to dodge.

"No!" Ash cried.

"Yes! Keep adding more pressure! Inflagetah, Flame Impact on Dunsparce, and Pajay, Solar Beam on Greninja again!" Tiko ordered.

"Dunsparce, Dig! And Greninja, counter that Solar Beam with Ice Beam!" Ash said. "And Splendifowl, watch over Greninja, no doubt Chimaconda will take this opportunity to attack!"

Dunsparce quickly burrowed underground, narrowly avoiding Inflagetah's burning slam, while Pajay fired a green and golden energy stream at Greninja, which was countered by a blueish white jagged beam of chilling power. The two attacks clashed against each other, but didn't push each other backwards.

"Now's our chance! Chimaconda, Flamethrower on Greninja! And Inflagetah, Extreme Speed on Greninja as well from the flank! Make sure neither of you get in each other's way!"

That was smart. Splendifowl could only protect Greninja from one direction, so the other had a clear way to strike. As Inflagetah dashed from one side and Chimaconda took a deep breath to build up fire and heat on its throat, Ash was forced to make a decision.

Or he would have been, if it weren't for Ash's third Pokemon.

"Dunsparce, now!" Ash shouted.

With a loud, drilling noise, Dunsparce burst from under the spot Chimaconda was standing, slamming into the Chimera Pokemon's belly and launching it backwards, interrupting the Flamethrower.

"No! I can't believe I have forgotten about that snake!" Tiko said, slapping his forehead.

"Well done! And Splendifowl, Air Cutter at Inflagetah!" Ash ordered, his voice sounding less worried and more confident.

"Dodge it, quickly!" Tiko countered.

"Sple, fowl!" Splendifowl whistled, flapping his wings in order to send several blades of compressed air at the Firebolt Pokemon.

Unfortunately, at such speed Inflagetah couldn't slow down and maneuver in order to dodge the attack. The blades of air struck true, interrupting the attack and sending the pure Fire-type tumbling backwards.

"Yes! Well done!" Ash cheered.

"Sple, splendi!" Splendifowl whistled happily, sharing his trainer's joy.

As both trios of Pokemon regrouped and prepared to continue the battle, the artificial sun flickered. It was very brief, but almost everybody noticed it.

"Hey look, the Sunny Day is about to end," Bonnie pointed out.
"Good, that way Tiko's attacks won't be so overpowered!"

Clemont, however, shook his head. "Nothing stops Tiko from ordering Pajay to cast it a second time. And there's little reason not to do it, given how much it's boosting his team while weakening Greninja's Water-type attacks."

"Drats!" Bonnie grumbled, crossing his arms.

As the siblings talked, Serena looked at Ash, trying to guess what was going through his mind. It was obvious that he had noticed the effect of the Sunny Day ending, and like Clemont he realized Tiko would just renew it. The question was, what Ash could do to prevent such a thing?

"Alright, I'm done with just reacting to whatever you do! Time to act!" Ash declared, throwing a punch forward. "Greninja, Water Shuriken at Chimaconda! Splendifowl, Air Cutter at Pajay! And Dunsparce, Rollout into Inflagetah!"

"Gre, NINJA!" Greninja said, taking the shuriken from his back and tossing it forward.

"Spleeeeeeee... !" Splendifowl loudly whistled, firing blades of compressed air with each beat of his wings.

"Dun, duns!" Dunsparce said, rolling into a ball and steamrolling towards Inflagetah.

"Chimaconda, counter that shuriken with Flamethrower! Pajay, dodge and Fire Blast! And Inflagetah, dodge as well and Extreme Speed on Greninja!"

Blades of compressed air flew towards Pajay, who dodged most of them, though some found their marks. After that, it opened its beak, releasing a massive torrent of flames towards the Paradise Bird Pokemon, who flew back in order to escape the fiery burning wall.

On the ground, the Chimera Pokemon opened its jaws, releasing another stream of blazes. With the artificial sun empowering its attack and weakening Greninja's, the Flamethrower easily overpowered the Water Shuriken and continued barreling towards the Kalosian Pokemon, forcing him to jump aside to dodge it, but that put him on Inflagetah's trajectory.

"Greninja, block Inflagetah with Night Slash!" Ash ordered. "And Dunsparce, make a U-turn and go for Inflagetah again!"

Just as Ash issued those orders, the artificial sun flickered a few times, before vanishing completely. The lighting dimmed, and the temperature began to slowly drop.

Thankfully, Greninja was fast enough to summon not one but two swords of darkness, one on each hand, and placing them in the form of an X in front of Inflagetah, managed to at least partially block the Firebolt Pokemon's attack when it slammed against Greninja, even if the Ninja Pokemon was pushed backwards. Meanwhile, Dunsparce had already turned around and continued rolling.

"You will never catch Inflagetah, Ash! No matter how fast your Pokemon are, they will never surpass Inflagetah's speed!" Tiko boasted, as he threw a hand forward. "Jump away and let Dunsparce smash into Greninja! And Pajay, set up another Sunny Day! People can't admire our great dancing in the dark, now can they?"

Following his trainers orders, Inflagetah gracefully jumped backwards, leaping above Dunsparce, who continued rolling at high speed towards Greninja, while Pajay extended its wings as its body began to glow with a bright orange aura as it prepared to summon another artificial sun.

Serena covered her mouth with her hands, fearing that Ash had screwed up. Dunsparce wouldn't be able to turn around in time. The only chance was for Greninja to dodge in time.

Ash then smirked. Was this part of his plan?

"Greninja, use Aerial Ace to kick Dunsparce into the air! Aim for Pajay!" Ash suddenly shouted.

"WHAT!?" Tiko shouted, taken aback. "Pajay, cancel that Sunny Day and dodge that!"

Greninja nodded, and raised one leg, which began to glow with a white light. As soon as Dunsparce was close enough, Greninja delivered a powerful kick, sending the still rolling Land Snake Pokemon towards Pajay, almost looking like a football player who had just kicked the ball towards the goal. Unfortunately for Tiko, Pajay was unable to cancel the move, as the artificial sun began to slowly form in the same spot as the previous one.

The rolling Dunsparce, now carrying even more momentum thanks to Greninja's Aerial Ace kick slammed into Pajay's gut just before it could finish the Sunny Day, canceling the attack, as the nascent artificial sun was snuffed out.

"PAAAAAAAAAA!" Pajay's squawk of pain echoed through the whole chamber as Dunsparce bounced upwards.

...

As Dunsparce was launched upwards, he stopped rolling as his body uncurled. Then, something odd happened. He felt as if time had slowed down to a crawl.

Dunsparce felt something he hadn't felt in his whole life: inner peace. He could feel as if he was where he truly belonged, despite being a landbound Pokemon: the sky. He felt light, ethereal even. He could sense all the air currents flowing around him, moving around everywhere. And not just that, if he tried hard, he felt as if he could control them.

Flapping his tiny vestigial wings, air currents began to gather around his body, forming a cloak of pressurized air. Inner peace, though, was quickly replaced with excitement as the Land Snake Pokemon realized what was going on. Oh boy, was this a new attack? Yeah, it felt like such.

And just below him was the perfect target for this new move: that annoying fire bird, still reeling from the Rollout. As he righted his body to align with Pajay, Dunsparce felt a little sorry. That Rollout had taken a lot of Pajay, and Dunsparce was about to unleash even more punishment. But alas, this was a battle.

... oh who was he trying to kid, he didn't feel sorry, he was feeling *gleeful* .

Once he was sure of his aim, he let the building pressure of the air on his tail go, resulting in an air explosion that propelled Dunsparce towards Pajay with the speed of a missile. Once Dunsparce slammed into Pajay for the second time, the cloak of pressurized air exploded, harming Pajay even further and pushing Dunsparce backwards.

The second squawk of pain was like music to the Land Snake Pokemon's ears, made even better by the cry of despair from the bird's trainer that followed the first one, as both Pokemon fell to the ground.

Wait a minute, *both* Pokemon?

It was then when Dunsparce realized just how *high* that kick and the subsequent bounce had sent him. And as soon as the realization hit, so did the panic.

"DUN! DUSNPARCE!" Dunsparce cried for help as he pummeled to the hard ground below. What was he thinking, believing in that nonsense of belonging in the sky?

Luckily for him, his cries for help were answered, as he felt a pair of talons grip his body, not so much breaking his fall as slowing it down just before he could splatter against the ground. Looking up, Dunsparce saw Splendifowl, the useless bird beating his wings as strongly as he could in order to decelerate.

Well, maybe not so useless, given that he had saved him.

"... parce," Dunsparce muttered in gratitude. In extremely reluctant gratitude.

...

As Splendifowl gently dropped Dunsparce back on the ground, Pajay slammed against it with a loud crashing noise. The Phoenix Pokemon's wings and legs were sprawled open, and his eyes all swirly.

The referee raised a flag in Ash's direction. "Pajay is unable to battle!"

Needless to say, Serena, Clemont and Bonnie cheered.

"Yes! One down, two more to go!" Bonnie said, pumping both fists up and down.

"And now that Ash has the numerical advantage, the match will be much easier," Clemont added.

"Awesome Dunsparce! Not only did you take out one of Tiko's Pokemon, you even learned a new move!" Ash excitedly said. His excitement, however, quickly faded into confusion. "... though, what move did you learn? I don't think I ever saw such an attack."

Now that was a good question. Serena quickly pulled her Pokedex and started to check Dunsparce's entry, specifically all the attacks he could learn, and looked for any attack that resembled what Dunsparce had done.

"I believe the attack is called Sky Fall, Ash," Serena said, reading from the Pokedex. "Wow, according to this, it's an extremely rare move! Only the Dunsparce native to Tandor can learn it!"

"Really? That's awesome!" Ash said, checking said move on his own Pokedex. "Oh look, it even has an additional effect!" He then looked at Dunsparce in joy. "Did you hear that Dunsparce? You learned to do something no other Pokemon can do!"

"Par, dunsparce!" the Land Snake replied.

Great, just what Dunsparce needed. An ego boost.

"The battle continues!" the referee declared.

"Time to press our advantage! Greninja, Water Shuriken, and Splendifowl, Air Cutter, both on Inflagetah! And Dunsparce, Dig underground!"

"Inflagetah, dodge them with Extreme Speed! And Chimaconda, Smokescreen!" Tiko ordered.

Greninja grabbed the shuriken from his back, before summoning another one on his remaining hand, tossing both of them as Inflagetah, while Splendifowl sent several blades of compressed air towards the Firebolt Pokemon, who began to run around at lightning-fast speed, dodging them attacks. Meanwhile, Chimaconda opened its jaws, releasing a cloud of black smoke that quickly engulfed the entire battleground.

"Greninja, on your guard! Dunsparce, don't come outside just yet! Splendifowl, dispel the smoke with Gust!" Ash quickly ordered.

"Sple, sple, spleeeeeeee!" Splendifowl whistled, as he beat his wings, producing a powerful wind current that began to dissipate the dense cloud of black smoke.

"Flame Impact on Greninja!" Tiko ordered.

"Block it with Water Shuriken!" Ash replied.

As Inflagetah, coated in roaring flames, blitzed towards Greninja, the ninja frog summoned yet another liquid shuriken and placed it in front of him like a shield just when Inflagetah was within striking distance. The two attacks met, but thankfully for Greninja the Water Shuriken prevailed, and Inflagetah was sent back by the rebound.

"Chimaconda, now, Thunder Fang!" Tiko ordered.

"What? Greninja, dodge!" Ash urged.

Unfortunately for Greninja, the Flame Impact had left him reeling for a couple seconds, and those seconds were all the Chimera Pokemon needed in order to get close and sink its lightning-coated teeth into Greninja's arm.

"GREEEEEEEEEE!" Greninja croaked in pain as electricity ran through his body.

"Argh!" Ash grunted in pain, as he clutched the arm Chimaconda was biting. "Gre... Greninja!"

"And Poison Fang!" Tiko ordered without mercy.

The snake that formed Chimaconda's tail moved as if it had life on its own, lunged towards Greninja with an open mouth that revealed four fangs glowing purple, before sinking them into the Ninja Pokemon's neck.

"Incredible! Chimaconda's unique body allows for two biting moves at the same time!" Clemont said in awe. "That was a very clever use of a Pokemon's unique body characteristics!"

"Big brother, could you *not* admire the enemy Pokemon?" Bonnie irritably said.

Fortunately for both Ash and Greninja, Dunsparce chose that moment to come from underground, slamming into Chimaconda's belly for the second time since the match began, and separating the Fire and Poison-type Pokemon from Dunsparce's teammate.

"S-Splendifowl, Quick Attack!" Ash ordered while fighting off the pain.

"Foowooooowl!" Splendifowl loudly whistled as he dived at Chimaconda, leaving a trail of fading white light behind, before slamming against the Chimera's Pokemon face.

That impact, combined with Dunsparce's Dig launched the Fire and Poison-type backwards, before landing painfully on its side. Chimaconda tried to get back on its feet, but its legs trembled as if they were jelly, before collapsing on the ground. It didn't move.

Seeing this, the referee raised a flag in Ash's direction. "Chimaconda is una-"

"Greeee..." Greninja let out a moaning croak, as he reverted back to his base form before falling to the ground facefirst.

"No, Greninja!" Ash cried.

Seeing this, the judge amended his announcement and raised both flags. "Both Chimaconda and Greninja are unable to battle!"

The reaction among Ash's friends was, as expected, a mixed bag.

"Only one more Pokemon to go. Too bad for Greninja, though," Bonnie said.

"It's okay, it's two versus one. It will be like Cali all over again," Serena confidently stated.

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu nodded.

"Well Ash, regardless of the outcome of this fight, I must admit that you're one of the toughest opponents I had the honor to battle," Tiko began. "From the very beginning I knew that Greninja was the biggest danger, and I had to take him out one way or another. And doing so cost me no less than two Pokemon. But now that I finally did it, this fight is over."

"You know, there's a saying in my hometown, 'don't count your Pidgeys before they hatch'," Ash replied. "Yes, I lost Greninja, but he's far from the only capable Pokemon of mine in this battlefield. And not only isn't the battle over, you only have one Pokemon left while I still have two. I'm the one with the advantage here."

"And in Tandor, we have another saying: 'Quality trumps quantity'," Tiko said, as he took something from his necklace. Ash could see it was a Keystone. "You have already expended your best card, while I have yet to use mine." Grinning, Tiko held the Keystone above his head. "Let's see how well you do against my final dance move, Ash! Come in my friend, take the burning flames of your heart and soul and bring them out! Mega Evolve!"

Forked beams of light shot from both Mega Stone and Keystone, each joining together and merging into one connecting trainer and

Pokemon. Inflagetah's body glowed with a bright white light as it transformed. With a final flash, the light disappeared, the helix of Mega Evolution briefly appearing for a second before the Mega Evolved Pokemon could be seen.

In its enhanced form Inflageth looked like a cross between a living creature and a machine or a vehicle. Most of its color scheme was now inverted, with its body being red and its forelegs yellow, though its neck and head kept the yellow color. Its horns were now curved, looking more like motorcycle handles. Previously red eyes were now vibrant blue. Its tail splitted into two shorter tails, with a huge orange flame blazing out between them. It also had a pair of exhaust pipes coming from each of its thighs.

"Your Inflagetah looks impressive, but this is far from the first Mega Evolved Pokemon I defeat at a disadvantage," Ash stated, no doubt recalling his match against Korrina in Kalos, and more recently his match against Cali, which just like now was two of Ash's Pokemon against the Gym Leader's single Mega Evolved one.

"Those are some big words. Let's see how they fare against the power of my Pokemon," Tiko said, shaking his head. "Inflagetah, Extreme Speed!"

What sounded like engines revving up filled the chamber, as blue flames shot from Inflagetah's exhaust pipes, before dashing at Splendifowl and Dunsparce at imperceptible speed, knocking both Pokemon down with a thundering noise.

"What? What happened?" Bonnie asked, blinking.

"Such speed..." Clemont said in awe. "Inflagetah was fast before, but his speed is beyond incredible now!"

"You're right on the money, kid," Tiko said, seemingly hearing Clemont. "Mega Inflagetah is Tandor's fastest Pokemon, and one of the fastest Pokemon in the world at large, with only a few Legendary Pokemon being able to match its speed," Tiko explained,

his tone carrying a boastful edge. He then looked at Ash and smirked. "You can't beat what you can't hit, Ash."

"We'll see about that! Splendifowl, Quick Attack! And Dunsparce, follow up with Rollout!" Ash commanded.

"Dodge them!"

Just like he did with Chimaconda, Splendifowl folded his wings and dove at Inflagetah, leaving a trail of vanishing white light behind him, just as Dunsparce rolled towards the Firebolt Pokemon. Inflagetah, however, was able to easily outspeed both Pokemon, moving so fast it was almost impossible to track it down.

"And now counterattack with Flame Impact!" Tiko ordered.

"Quick, Splendifowl, fly high! Dunsparce, hide underground with Dig!" Ash quickly ordered.

As Inflagetah blitzed towards Ash's two Pokemon, its body covered in a cloak of flames, Splendifowl flew into the air while Dunsparce burrowed underground, narrowly avoiding the no doubt devastating move.

"And once again you're pushed on the defensive, Ash," Tiko said, wagging his finger at the teen. "You won't win the dance floor by playing it safe."

"I'm not going to buy into your taunting, Tiko. When I checked Inflagetah before, I noticed its ability was something called 'Acceleration', something I had never seen before," Ash began. "Which boosts speed based moves such as Extreme Speed or Flame Impact. It may not be my style, but I can't let my Pokemon take anymore hits, or this match might be good as over."

"You're right but... what are you going to do then?" Tiko asked. "You can't beat me by playing defense."

"No, but I can put my Pokemon at a safe distance and whittle down yours from afar!" Ash said, throwing a punch. "Splendifowl, stay where you are and bombard Inflagetah with Air Cutter!"

"Dodge them. From that distance, it shouldn't be too hard," Tiko said.

Inflagetah's exhaust pipes roared as blue flames poured from them, the Firebolt Pokemon running around the battlefield, easily dodging the rain of blades of air coming from above.

"Dunsparce, attack now!" Ash ordered.

And Dunsparce burst from underground, ready to smash into Inflagetah's underbelly just like he had done with Chimaconda before. But the pure Fire-type was too fast, and Dunsparce missed.

"Quickly, Dig underground before it can attack again!" Ash urged.

Thankfully, Dunsparce returned to the safety of the underground before Tiko could issue another attack.

"So, is that your plan, Ash?" Tiko asked. "Waiting for my Pokemon to get tired so you can land a good hit?"

"Inflagetah can't dodge forever," Ash stated.

"Obviously, but it can dodge for quite a long time. Inflagetah not only has speed, but also the stamina to match, so yes, while I try to use its speed to end a match quickly, Inflagetah can also win battles of attrition if necessary. On the other hand, Splendifowl and Dunsparce aren't Pokemon built for long confrontations. I can see that your Splendifowl's wing beat is slower than before. Soon he'll fall prey to exhaustion. Though, not that I'm going to wait for so long. Inflagetah, Bounce!"

"What!?" Ash asked. "Splendifowl, get out of there!"

Inflageath leaped into the air towards Splendifowl, its exhaust pipes acting as propellers, making it look like an actual missile.

Luckily, Bounce didn't carry the same blinding speed of Extreme Speed and Flame Impact, so thankfully the Paradise Bird Pokemon dodged it without much trouble.

"Dunsparce, attack now! It can't dodge while it's falling down!" Ash ordered.

"Even after what you've seen, do you still underestimate Inflagetah's speed?" Tiko asked, chuckling.

The moment Inflagetah's feet touched the ground it quickly ran away, with Dunsparce bursting from underground two seconds after it was no longer there.

"Now Inflagetah, turn around and use Extreme Speed before it can use Dig again!" Tiko shouted.

"Splendifowl, Mirror Shot!" Ash urgently said.

"Plow through it! You can weather a Steel-type move!" Tiko said.

Splendifowl shot a silver colored beam at Inflagetah, which took it headfirst. Unfortunately, the damage caused was minimal, and the Firebolt Pokemon had no trouble powering through it just as Tiko had ordered it to.

Then Inflagetah tripped over its own feet and stumbled face first into the ground. Once it got up, it looked around in confusion, slowly blinking as if it had trouble seeing.

"What!?" Tiko shouted.

"Mirror Shot might not be very effective against Fire-types, but its additional effect cares little for type matchups. And speed and blindness don't mix well, don't you think?" Ash asked.

Tiko smirked. "Very clever Ash, you got me there. But in the end, you only bought your Pokemon a few moments. The blindness will only last for a few seconds, and I won't fall for that trap again."

"Those seconds are all what I need to defeat you!" Ash boasted.
"Splendifowl, grab Dunsparce and carry it into the air!" Ash ordered.

Splendifowl dived towards Dunsparce, catching the Land Snake Pokemon between his talons and carrying him upwards.

"Your bird was exhausted enough before, and you're forcing him to take on some cargo? I'm disappointed Ash," Tiko said, before looking at Inflagetah, who was no longer blinking. "Bounce again. We'll defeat two birds with one stone."

Engines roaring, Inflagetah shot towards the two airborne Pokemon. There's no way Splendifowl would be able to dodge it while carrying a passenger.

"Now Dunsparce, Sky Fall!" Ash ordered. "And Splendifowl, release Dunsparce once the attack is ready!"

A cloak of swirly air currents formed around Dunsparce. Splendifowl removed his talons from the Land Snake Pokemon as he shot forwards like a missile. The two Pokemon met in the middle, the two Flying-type moves producing an explosion of air upon clashing, sending the two Pokemon falling back to the ground with a booming noise. This time, Splendifowl was unable to catch Dunsparce.

"Dunsparce!"

"Inflagetah!"

Much to both trainers' relief, both Pokemon managed to get back on their feet, proverbially in Dunsparce's case.

"Nice maneuver there, Ash. But I'm afraid your Dunsparce got the worst part of it," Tiko said. "Time to finish this! Inflagetah, Flame Impact on Dunsparce!"

Inflagetah rushed forward, its body covered in hot flames as it prepared to give Dunsparce the finishing blow, leaving a trail of

scorched spots behind it.

"No, Dunsparce!" Bonnie cried.

"Why Ash hasn't ordered Dunsparce to Dig?" Clemont wondered.

Then, all of sudden, Inflagetah stopped on its tracks, the cloak of flames disappeared as its body began to twitch uncontrollably.

Ash's lips curved into a smirk.

"Inflagetah? Why did you stop? What's wrong?" Tiko asked.

"Wait... it's paralyzed!" Clemont said in realization.

"Paralyzed? But how?" Serena asked. And judging by Tiko's face, he was clearly wondering the same thing.

"You see, something interesting I learned about Sky Fall when I checked the move on my Pokedex is that it has a good chance to paralyze the opponent," Ash began. "And Dunsparce's ability Serene Grace doubles that chance. That's when I realized that Sky Fall was the key to beat you. All I needed was an opportunity to strike."

"No... !" Tiko almost whispered, clenching his fists. "Inflagetah, Flame Impact again!"

For the second time in a row, the Firebolt Pokemon blitzed at Dunsparce while its body was covered in flames. But this time the attack carried none of the terrifying speed it had the previous times. Dunsparce had more than enough time to use Dig.

Not that Ash was planning to make him dodge the attack.

"Splendifowl, Gust! And Dunsparce, Ancient Power!" Ash ordered.

"Spleeeee!" Splendifowl's loud whistle echoed through the chamber as he began flapping his wings, producing a powerful tornado that slowed Inflagetah down even further.

"Duuuun... !" Dunsparce summoned a spinning ring of golden lights above him, which grew into golden glowing stones and flew towards the Firebolt Pokemon. The rocks mercilessly pelted the Fire-type, pushing it backwards with each strike.

"And finish off with Quick Attack!" Ash said, thrusting his fist forward.

Splendifowl folded his wings and dived from above at the Mega Evolved Pokemon, leaving a trail of fading white light. The Paradise Bird Pokemon struck the Firebolt Pokemon right in the face, sending it flying backwards, before landing painfully on its back.

"Inflagetah!" Tiko cried.

Inflagetah didn't make any attempt at getting back to its feet. It then returned to its base form, sealing its fate and that of the battle.

The referee raised a flag in Ash's direction. "Inflageath is unable to battle! And since Tiko has lost all his Pokemon while Ash still has two, the winner of the match is Ash Ketchum!"

Serena, Clemont and Bonnie cheered loudly as they ran into the battleground in order to congratulate Ash in person. Splendifowl then collapsed on the ground, no longer able to fight the exhaustion any longer.

"Great job, Splendifowl. I couldn't have asked anymore for you," Ash said, recalling his first Tandorian Pokemon. "Take a good rest. You too, Dunsparce. Ret-"

But before Ash could return the rowdy Normal-type, there was a crackling noise as the Land Snake Pokemon began to glow with a bluish white light.

"What... what's going on?" Serena asked.

"Is Dunsparce... evolving?" Clemont wondered out loud, as he adjusted his glasses.

"Wait, Dunsparce can evolve?" Ash asked in shock, before the shock faded into elation. "Awesome!"

Dunsparce's body began to elongate and stretch, quickly growing in size, until he reached a size that matched Coatlich'. His tiny vestigial wings also grew into proper wings as well, while two small arms sprouted to his sides. Once the light of the evolution faded, they could see the majestic creature Dunsparce had evolved into.

"Seraph, dun!" the newly evolved Pokemon said.

" Dunseraph, the God Snake Pokemon, and one of Dunsparce's evolutions. Dragon/Flying. Said to be descended from a Dunsparce that climbed Sky Pillar. It can alter the air pressure at will," Ash's Pokedex explained.

Everybody looked in awe at the Pokemon in front of them. It was a snake, like Dunsparce, and had the same eyes always shut and the same blue and yellow color scheme, but that's where the similarities ended. Rather than a snake, Dunseraph was a winged serpent, with two white feathered wings on his back and two smaller ones on his head. He still had the same drill at the end of his tail. There were blue stripes running down his back, and had two long whiskers coming from its chin.

"Whoa! You look amazing, Dunseraph!" Ash congratulated his newly evolved Pokemon. "See? It was thanks to your own strength that allowed you to reach this point. If we keep training hard, we'll see how far can you go!"

"Dun, dunse!" Dunseraph said before spreading his wings and taking off into the air, doing a couple laps around the chamber, as if testing his new flight capabilities.

"How is that Dunsparce can evolve?" Bonnie asked, as he followed the flying Pokemon with her eyes.

Serena was typing something on her Pokedex. "Oh, here it is! It says that for a Dunsparce to evolve, it needs to learn the move Sky Fall. Sky Fall is known to be a difficult move to learn, so trainers with a Dunseraph are rare."

"But guess that wasn't enough of a challenge for Ash, was it?" Tiko said, smiling, as he walked towards Ash. "And neither were my Pokemon. I threw everything I had at you, and it wasn't enough. Congratulations for a well earned victory, Ash. The Salsa Badge is yours."

Ash took the badge from Tiko's hand, and looked at it. It had the same shape as the yellow, orange and red skirt Tiko was wearing. Grinning, Ash held the badge above his head.

"I won the Salsa Badge!" Ash shouted.

"Pi, pikachu!"

"Dun, dunseraph!"

"So, where are you planning to go next, Ash?" Tiko asked. "If I'm not wrong, that was your fifth badge, so you still have to get a few more."

"Rosalind told me that if I managed to beat you, that I should go to Venesi City and challenge her, so guess that's where we're going next," Ash replied.

Tiko nodded. "Indeed. If you're good enough to beat me, none of the other Gym Leaders of Tandor will be much of a challenge, so you should face the Big Three of East Tandor."

"Oh man... now we have to cross that jungle again..." Clemont reminded everybody.

That comment was enough to dispel the festive mood brought by Ash's victory. The idea of having to cross that nasty jungle filled them with dread. Even if they kept their distance from the Anthell, there

was that angry Mankey and Primeape troop who no doubt would want some payback for the first time they fought them.

"You know..." Ash began, looking at Dunsparce, flying in circles above them. "I think I know how we can make the return trip more bearable..."

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"WOHOOOOO!" Bonnie hollered, her arms lifted above her head. "This is amazing!"

"Bonnie! Don't do that and hold onto Serena! You're going to fall down!" Clemont chided.

"You should better listen to your brother, Bonnie," Serena agreed. "It's going smooth now, but it can get more turbulent any time."

Two giant serpents flew high above Baykal Forest, Ash's Dunseraph and Serena's Coatlith. Ash was riding the former with Clemont as his passenger, while Serena was riding the latter, Bonnie sitting behind her. So far, all of them were enjoying the flight, contemplating the field of green that extended below their eyes.

Now that both Ash and Serena had flying Pokemon big enough to carry them, he had suggested using them as mounts to travel. Even though Ash often preferred to take the scenic route, it seemed that even he was tired of Baykal Forest.

"Next stop, Venesi City!" Ash triumphantly cried, as his and Serena's dragons flew towards the horizon.

Author's Note: Yeah, Ash and Serena are dragon riders now despite their lack of Valyrian blood.

Hope you liked the battle against Tiko. I decided to make it a Triple Battle in order to make it more unique, and to show why

Tiko is such a big deal, since most challengers are caught flat footed when forced to use such an unusual format. While the battle could be chaotic, I hope it wasn't too hard to follow, and above everything, fun.

I also wanted to make it a little different and have Greninja be the first (and only) of Ash's Pokemon to go down, leaving the two non-aces to pick up the slack against Tiko's own ace. Like Ash just said, I want to show that every single one of his Pokemon is able to carry their weight and reach victory.

And yet another evolution in Dunsparce finally becoming Dunseraph! This is one of the evolutions I've been wanting to do the most and the reason for giving Ash a Dunsparce, but I couldn't have him evolve too early, since Dunseraph is quite the powerful beast and his ability to carry the entire group through the air would allow them to bypass many natural obstacles, such as caves or dense jungles. But since the story's remaining sections involve much less trekking or hiking, there's no problem.

With this, the West Tandor portion of the adaptation is done (at least when it comes to Gym Leaders and Contests) and now we can finally move to the East side of the continent.

Thanks a lot to Lipeghoul, Diatomic Rex, BrightNova169, Fox McCloud, hirowriter, MarkusDarkus87 and MegaSalamence64 for reviewing last chapter, and special thanks to Viroro-kun for beta-reading this chapter, whose edits and suggestions made it so much better.

Next time, our heroes prepare to leave West Tandor, while a certain villainous group also gets into position for its next big move. See you then, and don't forget to leave a review!

Journey to the East

Chapter 44:

Journey to the East

Mount Actanite

A chain of mountains divided West Tandor in two halves, one to the north, and the other to the south. Mount Actanite, located on the westernmost edge of the chain, is the highest of these mountains, and one of Tandor's most important landmarks. On top of Mount Actanite is Actanite Town, where the Tandor League takes place once a year.

However, while there will be plenty of events worth attention taking place in such a locale, that's not why we're here right now.

Because the place of interest right now isn't the summit, but the depths. Under Mount Actanite lies a complex maze of caves and tunnels, with rivers and waterfalls of magma flowing through it, and populated by extremely powerful Pokemon. Back in the day, trainers that hoped to take part in the Tandor League were forced to climb to the very top of the mount through these caves, though thankfully the practice has been abandoned due being considered too dangerous, so aspiring champions nowadays can take the cable car to the top like non-participants do. Though some people still try to climb to the top the old fashioned way as a way to prove their strength.

Right now, a single, canine-looking Pokemon crossed the maze of tunnels at great speed, unperturbed by the extreme heat produced by the magma. At first sight he might look like a Nuclear Pokemon, given his color scheme of black and vibrant green, but the truth couldn't be any further from that.

Despite its small size and not that impressive appearance, every other Pokemon that crossed the newcomer's path quickly scurried away, sensing the immense power the seemingly unassuming creature hid within himself.

Eventually, the outsider reached his destination: a large chamber with several waterfalls of magma that fell upon a single, large pool of molten rock. For humans and most Pokemon, nothing of value was in this chamber, but the outsider knew better. For this place held the being that the mountain was named after.

All the outsider needed to do was to flex his power a little.

The results were almost immediate, as a dome raised from the pool of magma, revealing a large creature under it.

A large Pokemon with a lithe but strong body held by long, thin four legs ended in large feet with three metallic claws. His body ended on a long tail with two metallic blades at the end, like those of an ax. His skin was dark blue, and had a black underbelly. He had an elongated, domed head with red eyes, visible fangs sticking out of his mouth, and a pair of forked horns over each eye.

" WHO DARES TO DISTURB THE PEACE OF MY SANCTUM!?"

The Pokemon bellowed, making the cave shake and the magma bubble up with his sheer power alone. Then, upon seeing his unwanted guest, the Pokemon's unbridled anger vanished, replaced by mere annoyance. **"Oh, it's *you* ."**

"Yes, it's me," the outsider replied. "And do you think that's a proper way to address a superior, Actan?"

Because this was Actan, one of Tandor's foremost Legendary Pokemon. The one who taught humanity the secrets behind radioactive metals, who dwelled in the fiery depths under the mountain that bore his name.

" Oh, spare me the attitude, Zygarde," Actan replied, shaking his body in order to get rid of the bits of magma clinging to it. **"Oh, wait, I hear that you have a new name now. Smushy, it is?"**

" Squishy, " Zygarde corrected. "But don't think for a second that I let anybody call me that. Only one being is worthy of calling me that, and you are not her."

" Whatever," Actan said dismissively. **"Why are you here, Zygarde? I honestly thought you had forgotten that this region existed. How long has it been since you last came here? Three, four centuries?"**

"You should know why I'm here, Actan," Zygarde replied. "In a rather short span of time, two human power plants have suffered meltdowns that resulted in nuclear catastrophes, leaving the lands around them as toxic wastelands and twisting the Pokemon into mindless monsters."

" Why are you telling me this? Do you expect me to punish those humans because of their lack of skill with my gift?" Actan asked.

"We both know the humans are not to blame, Actan," Zygarde replied. "There's something out there. Something evil, and very powerful. Something that's directing the Nuclear Pokemon to attacking Tandor. Even from here, you must have sensed it."

" Of course I did, who do you take me for?" Actan replied, almost sounding offended. **"But I'm not going to interfere. At least not yet. Right now the humans are containing the catastrophe to a single spot. If they fail, I shall make my move."**

"Good. All I ask you for the time being is to keep your eyes peeled," Zygarde said, as he turned around, ready to leave. "And once this threat is dealt with, I'll help heal the land with my power."

" Have you talked with my brother too?" Actan asked.

"Right now, the danger seems to be contained in West Tandor," Zygarde said. "But I think I could pay a visit to Lanthan in order to warn him of potential dangers."

And with that, Zygarde left.

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Maskara Channel

Thanks to their newly evolved Dragon-type Pokemon, the group managed to not only cross Baykal Forest in record time, but also bypassed Comet Cave by flying over it, and reached Comet Port in only a fraction of a time it would have taken if they walked.

In order to get to Venesi City they needed to cross the Maskara Channel, the body of water separating West Tandor from its Eastern counterpart. While it was relatively small, it was too big to merely fly, so they had to board a ship that would take them to a port on Maskara Island. From there, they'd have to walk towards Venesi City, which was in the southeasternmost part of the island. Unfortunately, the waters around the island were shallow and full of sharp, jutting rocks which created natural barriers, making navigation from west to east all but impossible.

Resting on the ship's handrail, Serena took a deep breath of sea air. "Ahhh, this is so great, isn't it?"

"Well, it's not as great as flying, but it beats crossing another jungle," Bonnie agreed. "At least we won't have to worry about being attacked by angry territorial Pokemon or running into the lair of human-eating bugs or-"

"I can see that our trip through Baykal will be one to remember," Ash chuckled. "And after that, even I can agree that something like this is a welcomed change of pace."

"Pika," Pikachu nodded.

Right now, Ash, Serena and Bonnie were on the ferry's deck, watching the sea as the ship sailed through it. The sun was shining, there were barely any clouds in the sky, and the fresh sea breeze made staying outside very pleasant. Aside from the sea, the trio also watched the Pokemon around them, a flock of Birbie and Aveden flying above them, as well as some fish Pokemon that sometimes jumped out of the water: both species being black and red, one having a small, black oblong body with small red fins and a diamond-shaped black tail.

"Frynai, the Kunai Pokemon. Water/Steel. A favored Pokémon of Ninja clans. They propel themselves backwards through the water to attack with their sharp tails." The Pokedex explained.

Next to them was a similar Pokemon, only with a larger, longer and sleeker body, whose tail was gray and shaped like a three-ended prong.

"Saidine, the Sai Pokemon, and Frynai's evolution. Water/Steel. They are the bane of many fishermen as their bladed tails often cut fishing lines. They can change direction rapidly in the water." The Pokedex supplied.

"Hey, why don't you let your Pokemon out? Especially the fliers. I'm sure they'll enjoy spreading their wings," Bonnie suggested.

"Hey, good idea!" Ash said, picking half of his pokeballs.

"Splendifowl. Dunseraph, Frosthra, come out!"

"You too, Coatlith!" Serena said, sending her only flight-capable Pokemon.

The four Pokemon materialized mid air, and once they realized where they were, they immediately took off, gaining altitude but never getting too far away from the ship.

Dunseraph and Coatlith were the ones that flew the slowest, given that their huge size made their movements difficult. But while

Coatlith merely flew at her own pace and enjoyed the cool breeze, Dunseraph seemed to push himself into flying faster. Splendifowl apparently noticed this, and while normally gentle and kind with his fellow Pokemon, it seemed he couldn't suppress an impulse of pettiness, and began to fly around the God Snake Pokemon, flaunting his relative agility and better maneuverability.

"Sple, spleee!" Splendifowl whistled as he performed a near perfect loop around Dunseraph's neck.

"Dun, ser!" Dunseraph growled, trying and failing to smack the blue bird with a wing, but his teammate proved to be too nimble.

"Come on Splendifowl, don't tease Dunseraph," Ash replied. "I know you believe he deserves it, but try to be the bigger person. Eh, bigger Pokemon," he amended.

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu added.

Ash's words seemed to have some effect on the Paradise Bird Pokemon, who looked a little ashamed of himself and moved from Dunseraph, giving him space to fly at his own pace.

"Wait, now that I realize, we're in the middle of the sea!" Serena said, as she picked another pokeball. "Syrentide, come out! I bet you're going to enjoy this!"

The pokeball opened, and next to Serena appeared her first Tandorian Pokemon. Upon seeing the sea, the Siren Pokemon beamed.

"Sy, syren!" Syrentide cried in joy as she leaped into the water. The trio of humans saw how fast Syrentide swam, being able to match the ferry. She would sometimes leap out of the water while squealing in elation.

"Heh, look at her go," Ash chuckled.

"Syrentide are a Pokemon that mostly live in the open sea," Serena reminded Ash. "Even if she's okay traveling with us, I'm sure she missed this."

Upon seeing Syrentide, Splendifowl forgot about Dunseraph and quickly dived to fly next to her. For a few moments, the two of them moved together.

Syrentide smirked "Syren, sy, tide!" The Water and Fairy-type Pokemon cried teasingly, before shooting forward with the speed of a torpedo, leaving the stunned Splendifowl behind.

"S-Sple...?" he whistled.

"Come on Splendifowl, you aren't going to let her beat you, are you?" Ash asked in a somewhat taunting manner.

This seemed to snap Splendifowl out of his stupor, as his eyes gleamed with resolve.

"Fowl, fo!" Splendifowl whistled, before pushing forward with Quick Attack, ready to catch Syrentide.

As they watched the two Pokemon race, they could see a tiny bit of land poking out in the horizon, which became slowly bigger and more visible as the ferry sailed towards it.

"There's Maskara Island. Once the ship docks, it's a walk until we get to our next destination," Serena pointed out.

"Venesi City," Ash said. "I can't wait until we get there!"

Serena rolled her eyes, but smiled. "You just had a Gym Battle not long ago, and you're already craving for another," she chuckled good naturedly. "Never change, Ash."

"Oh, right. That too, hehe," Ash bashfully said.

Serena turned at Ash, mildly shocked by what the raven haired teen had implied. "Wait, what? You *weren't* thinking in the Gym Battle Rosalind promised you if you beat Tiko?"

"Eh... well, I was thinking about our next date," Ash said, rubbing the back of his neck as a red tinge colored his cheeks, before his signature boundless excitement emerged. "I remember that you said something about Venesi City, so I did some digging and-"

"Guys!" the last member of their group burst out of a nearby door, startling them. "You have to see this!"

Bonnie crossed her arms and shot Clemont with an unamused glare. "Way to go brother. You interrupted Ash when he was getting all romantic. Do you know how rare that is?"

"It's okay. So, what's going on, Clemont?" Ash asked. "You look kind of nervous."

"Professor Larkspur is on the news!" Clemont said, before turning around and dashing back towards the ship. "Come on guys!"

The other three looked at each other, and without exchanging a word they decided to follow Clemont to see what was so excited about. They followed him towards one of the ferry's common areas, where Clemont's laptop was opened, the screen displaying a paused video of what looked to be the news, showing a blond anchorman and a black haired anchorwoman, both looking to be in their early forties, and a logo that said 'Tandor News Network' on the bottom left.

"Here, look!" Clemont said, pressing the 'play' button.

"-and now, we've received a special report coming from Larkspur Laboratories," the anchorwoman began. "Which informs us that we might be a step closer to deal with the threat of Nuclear Pokemon."

"Indeed," the blond anchorman interceded. "Nuclear Pokemon have attacked both Bealbeach City and Vinoville Town in the past weeks,

destroying the two nuclear plants near those population centers, and leaving the latter as an uninhabitable, toxic wasteland. Scientists believe that capturing Nuclear Pokemon is paramount in order to study them, learn how we can fight them better, and hopefully, restore them to their original state. But alas, the current pokeball's inability to capture these Pokemon made the task substantially harder.

"That's it, until now!" the anchorwoman continued. "Because a few moments ago, Professor Larkspur, founder and CEO of Larkspur Laboratories, has announced that his team has developed the very first prototype of pokeball capable of keeping Nuclear Pokemon inside without breaking it. These new pokeballs have been dubbed 'Nuclear Balls', aptly enough."

The screen changed to a video of a man wearing technician clothes inside a metallic room, commanding a Palij to battle a Nuclear Chiynmunk. Once the Chipmunk Pokemon was weakened enough, the man tossed the pokeball at the Nuclear Pokemon, which was turned into energy and was sucked inside. However, rather than the ball exploding, as it had happened to Ash in Bealbeach, the ball dinged after shaking three times, keeping the Pokemon trapped inside.

"As you can see, these pokeballs have been tested, and their efficacy is one hundred percent, according to a Larkspur Laboratories' spokesman," the anchorwoman finished.

"According to several sources, the Tandor Regional Government has already arranged with Larkspur Laboratories for these new type of pokeballs to be mass produced, and there are talks for increased fundings in order to continue the fight against the threat of Nuclear Pokemon."

The video ended there. Clemont then turned towards his friends, beaming with excitement. "See? I told you you had to see it!"

"So, Nuclear Pokemon can be caught now?" Ash asked. "That's great. Too bad we didn't have that kind of pokeball when the Nuclear Pokemon attacked Bealbeach and Vinoville."

"Back in the day, Nuclear Pokemon like Alain's Xenomite or my own Geigeroach were the only ones people could catch, and normal pokeballs worked just as fine," Clemont said, picking Geigeroach's pokeball and looking at it. "But these corrupted Nuclear Pokemon... the way radiation changed them also made them impossible to catch through normal means."

"Still, better late than never," Serena said. "From what I heard, there are still scores of Nuclear Pokemon around Vinoville Town and the former Wheatfields. They haven't moved from there, but I feel it's only a matter of time until they do."

"Yeah. The next time the Nuclear Pokemon attack, we'll be better prepared. And it will be thanks to Professor Larkspur," Clemont said.

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Silverport Town, East Tandor - Team Omega's HQ

"... according to several sources, the Tandor Regional Government has already arranged with Larkspur Laboratories for these new type of pokeballs to be mass produced, and there are talks for increased fundings in order to continue the fight against the threat of Nuclear Pokemon."

Inside Professor Larkspur's personal office, the same news clip Clemont had shown his friends not long ago played as well. Larkspur has already seen that news report multiple times, but hearing it again never failed to bring a smile to his face.

Idiots, the lot of them.

No one had realized that Larkspur had swindled the Tandor Regional Government for a sum of money ten times higher than needed in

order to mass produce the Nuclear Balls. And that wasn't even taking into account the additional funds for further research. Even if they weren't any closer to their main objective than they were a few months ago, at least he would soon have more money than he could spend in several lifetimes

And the best part? The Nuclear Balls were just the tip of the iceberg. Even if the main objective of the mission to the Nuclear Plant Epsilon has been a failure that resulted in the loss of many human and Pokemon assets, it ended up with a net positive gain, since Anika was able to retrieve terabytes worth files from Lucille's computers. Many of them corrupted and sadly beyond fixing, of course, but it wasn't all lost.

As he did every day, he checked the Team Rocket's server to see if there was any news. And as usual, nothing. That was good.

Team Omega had done many deals with other criminal organizations, Team Rocket included, often selling them tech. What none of them had found out is that said tech came with a computer virus that allowed Larkspur access to their servers, and thus the leader of Team Omega could monitor their movements.

While normally they didn't do anything that merited his attention, one day he was informed that they had found that Team Rocket had plans to set a foot on Tador. This matched a recent pattern of regional criminal organizations collapsing, only for Team Rocket to move and fill the void left behind.

If Giovanni thought that this was going to be a repeat of Team Plasma or Flare, he had another thing coming. All he needed was to gather some incriminating evidence (not much, or else his infiltration would become evident) and send it anonymously to the proper authorities. That's how Larkspur got Team Rocket's Sinnoh cell completely compromised. The effect was instant, and Giovanni was forced to divert resources to that region instead, preventing him from expanding his organization into Tador.

Tandor belonged to Team Omega, and Team Omega only.

That moment, a notification popped up. Speaking of the devil. Pushing his glasses up, the professor clicked on the 'accept' button on the notification, which morphed into a window showing Alina and Anika.

"Ah, Alina, Anika," the man said, leaning backwards on his chair. "I was expecting your call. I hope this is your report on our fledgling Gamma Division?"

"Indeed, professor," Alina, the teal haired sister, answered..

"We have the results of the tests," Anika, the brown haired - and normally very foul mouthed - sister added.

"Excellent. Enlighten me, then," Larkspur said. "I hope all the tests produced positive results?"

"They were within expectations, sir," Alina said, pressing some keys on her keyboard, which displayed the blueprints of what looked like an advanced body armor appeared on a corner of Larkspur's screen. "This is the Gamma Armor, sir. Resistant not only to radiation, but also to attacks from Nuclear Pokemon," the teal haired sister began explaining. "It also has a cerebral relay that allows its bearer to keep Nuclear Pokemon bound to their will."

"Unfortunately, unlike the original design, the armor can't do it on its own," Anika interceded. She pressed a couple keys, and next to the armor blueprints appeared the blueprint of a high-tech collar. "So we needed to use another project as support: the Pokemon Willpower Suppressant."

"I thought that the PWS didn't work on Nuclear Pokemon," Larkspur replied.

"Originally, it didn't, just like how normal pokeballs couldn't capture them either," Anika continued. "Fortunately, the research

breakthrough that allowed us to develop the Nuclear Balls also allowed us to adapt the PWS to Nuclear Pokemon."

"It doesn't work on its own, since it needs somebody wearing the Gamma Armor for it to properly function," Alina interceded. "It's, admittedly, a rather shoddy job. But for the time being, it produces the desired results, and does what we intended until we find a way to perfect the design."

"If it can allow our troops to walk through an irradiated zone unharmed and control Nuclear Pokemon to their will, then I said it's a success," Larkspur decided to see the glass half full, much to the twins' relief. "Now, what about Project 092? Have you figured out something about its whereabouts?"

"By studying the corrupted files I've been able to fix, I can assure with one hundred percent certainty that it was under Nuclear Plant Epsilon while we were there," Anika said, before wiping a strand of brown hair from her face.

"Following radiation traces, we can also assure that Project 092 was on Nuclear Plant Zeta before it blew up," Alina added. "And in fact, we believe it might have been the culprit."

"Yes, yes, that's nice, but I want to know where it is *now*," Larkspur impatiently asked.

"Based on the radiation levels... we believe it's still somewhere on Nuclear Plant Zeta, sir," the teal haired woman said.

Larkspur pressed the fingers of his hands together, before letting out a sigh. "That complicates things. Even with our Gamma Division, breaking into that place will be next to impossible."

Even if one were to ignore the barricades the Rangers had erected in order to stop both radiation and Nuclear Pokemon from spreading to the rest of the region, satellite readings showed that the Nuclear Pokemon there were without number. Even if he was able to equip

all his troops with Gamma Armors and send them there, the sheer number of strong Nuclear Pokemon there would tear them apart.

"In that case, I believe we might need to increase our forces in both quantity and quality if we're going to breach that place," Larkspur said. "How many volunteers do we have to form this new division?"

"More than we initially believed, sir. The increased monetary compensation was a great incentive," Alina said.

"Yeah, that and the idea of commanding those little radioactive monsters to do their bidding," Anika added with a snort.

"A man who loves his job is a productive worker, as they usually said," Larkspur grinned. "Speaking of them, how about the Nuclear Pokemon? Do we have enough for our men to use?"

"The pens are at their full capacity, sir," Alina said, sounding optimistic. "Not only can we do that, but we have plenty of specimens to either study or sell. The latest raids to the irradiated Wheatfields have been quite successful."

"Excellent. Alright, in that case, all that division needs is a captain to lead them. Send me the profiles of those who scored the highest marks on the tests so I can choose the most suitable candidate for such a role."

"Right away, sir," Alina said.

"That would be all. Continue with your work," Larkspur said, ending the communication.

Alone again, Larkspur exhaled. As much as he wanted things to be different, he needed to be patient and try to take every victory he could get, no matter how small. Even if his plans weren't going as smoothly as he would have wanted, at least they were progressing at an acceptable pace.

Another notification popped up, this one with several files attached to it. Clicking on the 'download' button, several files opened at once, almost filling the screen completely. He minimized all of them except one, which he began to read.

Yes, he needed to be patient. He had waited ten years for this. It would do him no good if everything went to hell because he couldn't have waited a few more months.

...

Maskara Island

By the time the ferry had arrived at Maskara Island, the sun was starting to set. According to Serena's travel guide, it would take at least two days of traveling on foot until they got to Venesi City. Of course, there was the option of using Dunseraph and Coatlith as aerial transports and do it only in a fraction of a time, but given that there was no hurry - the Grand Festival was still two months away - they agreed with Ash's suggestion of taking the scenic route.

The port on Maskara Island was even smaller than Comet Port, where they had taken the ferry. A small town built around docks and warehouses, mostly from the people who already worked there. Given that it shared an island with Venesi City, no wonder most people preferred to live in the latter place.

Fortunately, the small port still had a Pokemon Center, which was all Ash and his friends needed as for now.

"Raptorch, use Brick Break!" Ash ordered.

"Parry it with Needle Arm, Quilladin!" Clemont replied.

Serena watched how the Fire Dino Pokemon leaped above the Spiny Armor Pokemon while making a somersault mid air, and bringing down his tail, glowing with a pure white light. Quialldin, for his part, stood his ground and crossed his arms in front of his head.

Said arms began to glow with a green light as energy spikes grew out of them.

The two attacks clashed, and Raptorch was pushed backwards.

"Well done, Quilladin!" Clemont cheered.

"Qui, quilla!" Quilladin drank his trainers' praise with gusto.

"Raaaaa... !" Raptorch whined, as he nursed his hurt tail.

"Raptorch, you okay?" Ash asked. Once the Fire Dino Pokemon nodded, Ash smiled. "Very well! Attack now with Flamethrower!"

"Use Vine Whip to launch yourself above the flames, Quilladin!" Clemont ordered.

Raptorch took a deep breath, before releasing a stream of roaring flames at his opponent. Quilladin, for his part, generated a pair of whips from his body and used them to catapult himself into the air and dodge the flames.

After Serena had won her final ribbon, training sessions had been more focused on Ash, given that he still had badges to win. Not that she minded, she knew that they would help her prepare once the Grand Festival was closer.

Plus, not that she didn't train at all. Before Clemont, it was her who was the one fighting against Ash, her recently evolved Pangoro versus Ash's Frothra. Given that her Pokemon had gone from a small, fast and nimble bear that she could hold between her arms to a monster of a bear that towered over her, Serena needed to check how Pangoro managed in proper matches.

And yes, like she expected, Pangoro could no longer make those impressive leaps with multiple somersaults mid air, but the Daunting Pokemon retained some speed and agility. Still, she would have to change the way Pangoro battled.

"Sure, Pangoro might not be able to move like Pancham did before, but he has gained a lot of physical strength and endurance upon evolving!" Ash had told her as the two of them battled. "So maybe try to develop combat tactics that make use of Pangoro's present strengths."

Serena didn't plan to ignore such advice.

Looking up, Serena saw her other Pokemon that had undergone rather drastic changes upon evolving, Coatlich. She was now perched atop the roof of the Pokemon Center, her body coiled around itself, looking at the sparring match between the two male trainers from her privileged vantage point. She didn't have the chance to test the limits of her newly evolved Pokemon just yet, but she planned to do so as soon as she could.

Lowering her sight, Serena looked at what was currently her biggest headache, regrettably enough: Oblivicorn.

As usual, the Dark Horse Pokemon was lying on a corner, alone and away from everybody else, human and Pokemon alike. While Serena was happy that the equine hadn't tried to escape from her like she did shortly after evolving, she wasn't making much progress. Whenever Oblivicorn was released from her pokeball alongside the rest of Serena's Pokemon, she would seek the most isolated place and lie there. She refused to interact with any of her other Pokemon or talk to her.

At the very least she was eating.

The honey blonde hoped that if she gave Oblivicorn space and enough time, the rebellious Pokemon would eventually turn around, or at the very least, try to be more receptive to her. But there has been no progress since the time she evolved.

" I guess I'll have to take the matters into my own hands before it snowballs into an even worse problem," Serena thought, as she

began to walk towards Oblivicorn. She put on her best smile and greeted her. "Hey, there. How are you doing, Oblivicorn?"

Oblivicorn didn't even raise her head. She merely opened her eyes, glared at her, snorted, and closed them again.

Serena sighed. "Come on Oblivicorn. I know that you're upset with me over something. Why don't we talk about it?"

No response.

Serena extended a hand to touch Oblivicorn, but pulled it back at the last moment. She wasn't sure how the Dark Horse Pokemon would react to physical contact. She had shown in the past willingness to use violence against her trainer, and Serena didn't want to risk it again.

"Come on, Oblivicorn. Please. Just tell me what's wrong so I can fix it," Serena insisted.

But Oblivicorn didn't pay her any attention.

Serena continued talking to her rebellious Pokemon for the next fifteen minutes, but there was no change in Oblivicorn, as the Dark Horse Pokemon continued to pretend like she wasn't there.

Seeing that she wasn't going to make any progress by insisting like that, she gave up and decided to try again once she could think of something else. Fortunately, Oblivicorn didn't resist being recalled back into her pokeball.

Turning back, she saw that Ash and Clemont had already finished their little bout and were recalling their Pokemon as well. Upon seeing Serena walking towards him, Ash turned towards her and smiled.

"Oh, hey," Ash said. "So, shall we go back inside and have some dinner? This training left me starving!"

"Sure," Serena said, as they walked back into the Center together. "So, how was training today?"

"Couldn't have been better. Dunseraph is on the verge of learning Dragon Pulse, and Raptorch has become much stronger recently," Ash happily told her.

"I'm glad to hear that," Serena said, smiling. "Rosalind won't know what hit her."

"Haha, yeah!" Ash agreed. His enthusiasm diminished a little before changing the topic: "I've seen you've been trying to talk with Oblivicorn again," he stated. Serena wordlessly nodded. "Any luck this time?"

Serena shook her head.

"Don't worry. I'm sure sooner or later, Oblivicorn will come around," Ash said with his usual optimism.

"I don't know, I..." Serena began. She grasped her blue ribbon. "It's been a few weeks since she evolved, and I haven't made any progress with her. And I'm not going to give up on her, not until I learn what's wrong, but... I admit I'm starting to get a little desperate..."

"Yeah, I know how you feel," Ash replied. "I think I told you about my Charizard, didn't I?" Ash asked.

Serena nodded. "You did. Though you never tell me how did you manage to make him listen to you."

"Well..." Ash began, growing a little uneasy as he rubbed the back of his head. "Let's say it's something I won't recommend you doing. Since Charizard was frozen after a battle against a trainer with a Poliwrath, and since we were on an island with no Pokemon Center, I had to spend all night taking care of him," he recounted. "I think that after that moment, either he saw me as a worthy trainer, or he saw

how much I cared about him, that he no longer disobeyed me ever again."

"Sounds about right. But I think Oblivicorn's case is a bit different," Serena replied. "I have the feeling that she's acting this way because something I did that offended her. And I don't know what it is, and she refuses to tell me. I think she wants to figure it out myself."

"I see. That's quite a pickle you are into," Ash said. "Still, I believe that if you stay by Oblivicorn's side and show her that you care about her, she'll eventually see what a wonderful trainer you are and will come around."

"I hope you are right," Serena said, before letting out a despondent sigh. "Because how am I supposed to make people smile when I can't even figure out why my Pokemon is mad at me?"

"You will figure it out," Ash insisted, placing a comforting hand on Serena's shoulder. "And if that's not the case... well, Oblivicorn will see how hard you're trying to make her happy. There's no Pokemon that can stay mad at you forever."

...

Team Omega's HQ

"You called for me, Professor?"

In front of Larkspur was a large, brown skinned man with a black beard and black hair styled in a military-style buzzcut, wearing standard Gamma Division battle armor. The man was tall, almost two meters in height, broad shouldered, and with a thick body packed with muscle.

"Yes, Darren. I have great news for you," Larkspur said, smiling. "I called you here to personally promote you to captain of the newly formed Gamma Division. Congratulations, Captain Darren."

"It's a great honor, professor," the man said, bowing in gratitude.

Yes, Darren was the perfect candidate to lead the fledgling elite division. The man used to be in the army, rising to the rank of Staff Sergeant, before being dishonorably discharged due repeated cases of insubordination and violent behavior. After that, he went on to have a couple jobs on private security firms before being fired for similar reasons, until he entered Team Omega and joined Alpha Division.

Some might have seen Darren as a mere brute, and a dangerous one. But where other, more short-sighted people only saw a dangerous man, Larkspur could see a fearless, natural-born leader that would make sure every mission would be complete.

"I'm still impressed by the way you commanded that Nuclear Gyarados," Larkspur praised. "I was afraid that, after going through the effort of capturing several, no one would be brave enough to take one."

"I may be a lot of things, professor, but a coward ain't one. That beast has great power, power that will serve me well," Darren proudly stated. "If those ninnies are too scared of a Pokemon without a will of its own, no matter how big, they have no business here!"

"I see that you don't lack conviction. That's good. I believe it's about time for you and your men to take the field," the bespectacled man announced.

A grin of excitement adorned Darren's face. "I'm ready, professor. What's my first mission?"

Larkspur pressed a few keys on his computer, and an holographic projection of a black haired young man appeared between the two men.

"This is Alain, one of our top priority targets. Find him, neutralize him, and bring him here. Make sure not to harm his Pokemon too much if

possible, especially his Charizard," Larkspur instructed. "I have seen that Pokemon in action, and it could fetch a high price in the black market."

Darren smirked at the projection. "That kid has his days numbered."

"You'll be given additional information on the target before you and your troops leave," Larkspur said. "Though, a piece of advice, captain. Try not to underestimate the boy. He's the most recent Kalos League winner. He won't go down without a fight."

"I hope so! More fun that way!" Darren laughed, before leaving Larkspur's office.

Darren walked out of the office, leaving Larkspur alone once again. The middle aged professor took a look at his computer's screen, which displayed three pictures, as well as information under each of them.

"Once Alain is in our power, that will be two out of three," Larkspur said, looking at the leftmost picture, next to Alain's. "And only Ketchum will be left."

Author's Note: After the Anthell and Ash's fifth Gym Badge back to back, we needed a calmer chapter for our heroes to relax and to set up future plotlines now that they are moving towards the Eastern side of the region.

Hello there, Squishy! Bet you guys weren't expecting him to show up in this story, did you? While he won't meet Bonnie and the rest of the group anytime soon, rest assured that they will reunite with him again.

And it seems like Team Omega is preparing for something big. And yeah, turns out that what happened with Team Rocket in Sinnoh that forced Giovanni to send the Trio there wasn't a

random coincidence (thanks to my beta Viroro-kun who gave me this idea).

Thanks a lot to Lipeghoul, Fox McCloude, dmm, hirowriter, MegaSalamence64, MarcusDarkus87 and Jose4Andres7 for reviewing past chapter. Sadly, my beta Viroro-kun wasn't available this time around, so I had to betaread the chapter myself. Hopefully he will be back for the next one.

Next chapter, Alain is back. In the meantime, don't forget to leave a review.

Reigniting the Flames of Rivalry

Chapter 45:

Reigniting the Flames of Rivalry

Maskara Island

It was a beautiful morning. The sun continued to shine in the sky with very few clouds to block it. The air was a little warm, but from time to time a cool sea breeze would blow, refreshing anybody who felt the heat was a little too much. All in all, it was a great day for traveling, so Ash and his friends were already on the road, eager to reach their next destination.

Maskara Island was a paradise of greenery. A sea of green grass extended before them, flanked by densely packed trees, with many small lakes and rivers that added a touch of blue. It reminded the group of the early days of their Tandor journey, with the same greenery with blue splashes.

As they walked, Serena was checking a travel guide on her tablet, wondering if there would be something worth seeing on Maskara Island, but as she scrolled down, nothing caught her interest.

"So, nothing?" Clemont asked.

Serena shook her head. "Aside from Maskara Port, it seems like the only notable spot on this island is Venesi City and... hey, what's this?"

"What's what?" Ash asked, as he tried to peek on her tablet.

"The Labyrinth... oh, it's a cave. One that goes underwater," Serena said, dejected.

"Oh heck no! Not another cave!" Bonnie said, vigorously shaking her head and crossing her arms in rejection. "Every time we get into a cave, something bad happens! So I'm not going to go into a cave that's underwater!"

"Nenene!" Dedenne agreed.

"Relax, we won't have to visit it," Serena assured her. "It says that people used to cross it to go from Maskara Island to the northern part of the region, but after a ferry service was put in place, only people looking for fossils ever visit it."

Bonnie let out a sigh of relief. "Good. After the Anthell, I refuse to step foot in another cave."

That moment, a shadow passed over them. Looking up, they saw a black and yellow bird-like Pokemon flying above them, going in the same direction as they were. They all looked at each other.

"Wait, was that...?" Clemont began to ask.

"A Voltasu," Serena said. She wouldn't forget one of the Pokemon that handed her her latest defeat. She sighed, already dreading what was about to come. "Sayaka must be nearby, then."

"How do you know it's hers?" Bonnie asked. "It could be a different Voltasu belonging to another trainer."

"From what I know of its species, Voltasu are very rare Pokemon, and they can only be found on Tsukinami Island, where Sayaka is from," Serena said. "It has to be hers."

"Look, it's landing near that tree," Ash said, pointing to a large tree next to a small lake in the distance. "There are a few Pokemon there already, though I can't see if they look like Sayaka's..."

"What are those flashes of light?" Clemont asked, placing a hand over his eyes in order to better focus his eyesight. "It looks like two

people are having a Pokemon battle..."

To no one's surprise, Ash beamed upon hearing those words, as if a switch inside his brain had been triggered. "Really? I have to see it!"

And the Kantonian trainer quickly ran towards the spot of the battle, with Serena and Bonnie behind him, and Clemont struggling to keep their pace. As they got closer to the site of the battle, they could see the battlers: to Serena's relief, neither of them were Sayaka, but a tall, black haired boy with a distinctive blue scarf and a shorter, redheaded girl in green clothes.

"Wait, are those...?" Bonnie asked.

"Come on, Bebe, Moonblast!" the girl said.

"Block it with Shadow Claw, Chainite!" the boy replied.

A Yellow Flower Florges formed a pink and white orb of power between her hands, before launching it at her opponent, an eldritch Pokemon that looked like a mass of smoky shadows coming out of a withered substitute doll in the form of an eye-less head with huge jaws and four limbs ended in curved claws, with a spiked ball painted like a pokeball chained to its neck. Said Pokemon delivered a swipe at the incoming Moonblast, bursting it like a mere balloon.

"Alain and Mairin!" Serena exclaimed, joyful. Not just to see their old friends, but because that meant she didn't have to deal with Sayaka.

The Kalosian pair turned in the direction of the group upon hearing their names, and they smiled as well. The two Pokemon also halted their battle in order to take a look at the newcomers.

"Hey, look at that! Serena and her friends!" Mairin pointed out.

"What a nice surprise," Alain said, smiling as well. "It's been a while since the last time we met."

"Haha, indeed!" Ash laughed. "It's a good thing that we saw that Voltasu flying towards here, otherwise we might have missed you!"

"Ah yes. Voltasu likes to fly around whenever we're not on the move," Alain said, looking at the Electric and Flying-type Pokemon, who was now resting under the tree. "Guess I should thank it for making this encounter possible."

"So, are all those your Pokemon?" Bonnie asked. No one found it surprising that the young girl was immediately drawn to the group of Pokemon, especially since many of them were unknown to both her and her friends. "They're all so cute! And whoa, is that Chespie?" Bonnie asked, pointing to a large Chesnaught.

"Yes! He has grown quite a lot since the last time you saw him, hasn't he?" Mairin said, patting Chespie on the arm.

"Ches, naught," Chesnaught cried, blushing a little.

Suddenly, one of Clemont's pokeball burst open, releasing Quilladin.

"Qui, qilla!" Quilladin said, as he went to greet Chesnaught.

"Chesna, ches!" Chesnaught said, as both Pokemon fist-bumped.

"Heh, as you can see, Chespie isn't the only one who evolved," Clemont stated.

"Though, if Chespie evolved, his nickname doesn't make much sense, since he's no longer a Chespin," Bonnie pointed out.

Mairin merely shrugged. "Chespie will always be Chespie, no matter how he looks."

"What other Pokemon do you have, Mairin?" Ash asked. "I recognize some Alain's, but I can't tell if the others are yours or his."

"Oh, sure," the redhead said. She waved at the Yellow Flower Florges. "This is Bebe, the very first Pokemon I caught. I caught her

back when she was a Flabebé, right after meeting Alain. I don't think I would have captured her without his help, since I was a newbie back then and his advice helped me a lot."

"Even without me, I'm pretty sure you could have gotten the hang of catching Pokemon on your own," Alain replied.

"But then I wouldn't have Bebe!" Mairin protested. "Anyway, because of the whole thing of Chespie getting sick due to that jerk Lysandre I didn't have much time to catch Pokemon in Kalos, but I'm slowly filling my team! Barry, Glassy, get over here!"

Two small Pokemon walked towards Mairin, though 'crawled' might have been a better term, given that one Pokemon only had two legs which clearly weren't meant for moving on ground, and the other had no limbs at all, unless one counted the hand its tail ended in. Ash and Serena immediately took out their Pokedex in order to scan these new Pokemon.

The first Pokemon was a small sea creature, with white skin, dark blue back, and a pair of small blue arms ended in four stubby fingers. It had two big, dark blue eyes.

" Glaslug, the Sea Slug Pokemon. Water/Ice. A Pokémon highly sensitive to the changes in seasons, Glaslug come and go with the warm undersea currents." The Pokedex explained.

The second Pokemon was a small, green scaled serpent with a dull orange underbelly, red spikes along its back, and a hand-like appendage at the end of its tail.

" Barand, the Hand Dragon Pokemon. Dragon. The appendage at the end of its tail is its primary form of attack, and it is able to deftly manipulate objects with it as if it were a hand." The Pokedex said.

"They both look so cute!" Bonnie cooed, as she knelt before them in order to take a better look at them.

"So, what are you guys doing here? Are you going to Venesi City too?" Ash asked. "Because if that's the case, we can go there together!"

"Oh, no, we've already been in Venesi City. I even defeated its Gym Leader too. No, we came here to prepare for my last Gym battle," Alain told him.

" *Last* Gym battle?" Ash repeated in amazement, which quickly turned into worry. "So you must have seven badges already! Oh man, and I only have five!"

"Hey, relax, Ash. This isn't a race, and there's still plenty of time until the League begins," Alain reassured him.

"Besides, I'm sure that if it wasn't for my contests and other... unexpected events," Serena said, and all her friends could tell she was talking about the nuclear disasters that happened when they passed through said areas."... you would have just as many badges, Ash."

"Plus, the winner of the Pokemon League isn't decided by who can collect eight badges the fastest, but who is the best trainer," Alain reiterated. "Speaking of which, now that you're here, this is a chance I can't let slip by a second time! I challenge you to a Pokemon battle, Ash! Your Greninja versus my Charizard!" Alain said, his excitement growing with each word.

"And I accept!" Ash said, Greninja's pokeball already on his hand.

"Great! Charizard, come here!" Alain said. But nobody came. A few seconds passed, and Alain began to look around. "Charizard...?"

"Ahem," Mairin said, poking Alain on the shoulder. When the taller boy looked at her, Mairin leveled a flat, unamused stare at him and pointed towards the tree with her thumb.

There was Charizard, leaning against the large tree, eyes closed and breathing slowly, deep in slumber.

"Oh... right." Alain said, a little dejected.

"Alain?" Ash asked. "Something wrong with your Charizard?"

"Eh... well, let's say that Charizard and I were training last night until very late. I got so much into the training that I lost track of time, and well..." Alain said in a rare display of bashfulness. "I'm somebody who doesn't need much sleep, but Charizard it's another story. Especially after how much we trained. I don't think he'll wake up anytime soon."

"Haha, I can relate to that, so no worries. I sometimes stay training until late because me and my Pokemon are having such a great time, Serena has to remind us to take it slow, hehe," Ash chuckled, rubbing the back of his head.

"Pikaa..." Pikachu said, patting his head.

Mairin sighed. "Boys..."

"I know, right?" Serena added, shaking her head.

"They're the worst," Mairin replied, crossing her arms.

...

After Ash and Alain calmed down from their mutual euphoria of seeing each other again, they agreed on a battle without either Charizard or Greninja. This time, they would use three Pokemon instead of just two.

The match was about to begin, Ash and Alain in front of each other, and Clemont in the middle, playing the role of referee as it was usual for these casual matches. The group had let all their Pokemon out, with Ash's Pokemon standing behind him, and Serena and Clemont's

standing around her, Bonnie, Mairin and her Pokemon, watching the match as well.

"The battle between Ash and Alain will be a one on one with no time limit! Both trainers will use three Pokemon, and they are allowed to switch Pokemon. The first trainer whose three Pokemon are unable to battle will lose," Clemont began. "Trainers, select your Pokemon!"

"Alright, Xenogen, you go first!" Alain said. No pokeball was thrown, as just like with Ash's, Alain's Pokemon were all standing behind him.

A Pokemon Ash had never seen before crawled forward. It had a long, black thin body with two bulky arms sticking out of it, and a long tail ending in green short tendrils. It had a large, curved oblong head with green fleshy tendrils around it as well as covering its mouth, fish-like green eyes with slitted pupils, and seemingly organic tubes connecting its arms, back and neck.

It reminded Serena of Xenomite. Perhaps an evolution? The Pokedex would tell if she was right or not.

"Xenogen, the Mutant Pokemon, and Xenomite's evolution. Nuclear. A bizarre life form which thrives in irradiated fields of nuclear waste. It is a parasitic creature that latches on to any prey and sucks out its life force." The machine explained, confirming Serena's assumptions.

"So, your Xenomite evolved, huh?" Ash asked.

"Sometime ago, yeah. Though I haven't been able to use him much lately," Alain pointed out. "After all the troubles with the nuclear plants... Nuclear-type Pokemon might make people uncomfortable. But not only you've already seen him before, but there are Nuclear Pokemon in your group as well," the taller boy said, taking a look at Geigeroach and Nucleon, sitting next to Bonnie.

"Alright then. My first pick is Frosthra!" Ash said.

"Fro, fros!" The Frost Moth Pokemon chirped in joy over being picked up first for the battle.

Clemont raised both hands before bringing them down in a chopping motion. "Begin!"

~Ash (Frosthra, ?, ?) VS Alain (Xenogen, ?, ?)~

"The first move is ours! Xenogen, Gamma Ray!" Alain shouted.

"Counter it with Signal Beam, Frosthra!"

The two Pokemon fired energy beams at each other, a multicolored one coming from between Frosthra's antennae and a vibrant green one coming from Xenogen's tail. However, much to Ash's shock, Xenogen's attack overpowered Frosthra, cutting through the Signal Beam before blasting the Ice and Bug-type pokemon backwards.

"Fro, frost!" Frosthra cried in pain.

"Ha! You can't just overpower a Nuclear-type attack," Mairin said. "Their offensive power is too much."

Serena hoped that Ash would take that lesson.

"Great! Let's keep the pressure on with Radioacid!" Alain ordered. Serena never heard that move before, but judging by the name, its type was obvious.

"Frosthra, use Protect!" Ash replied.

Something began to flow inside the tubes connecting to Xenogen's neck before the Mutant Pokemon released a stream of sickly green sludge. Fortunately, Frosthra was able to erect a defensive shield just in time. The sludge slid down the energy barrier, burning the grass and soil below with a loud sizzling noise the moment it touched it.

Serena cringed upon seeing that attack: it was the same move that Nuclear Gyarados had used on Sylveon during the battle of Bealbeach City. Sylveon began to whine and tremble, the memory of that battle still on her mind. Fortunately, Delphox and Pangoro, who were sitting next to her, quickly placed their paws on her back in order to calm the Fairy-type.

"Now, counter with Blizzard!" Ash replied.

"Use Protect yourself, Xenogen!" Alain ordered.

"Get closer to Xenogen!" Ash shouted.

As Frosthra began to beat his wings, producing strong gusts of really cold wind with ice shards and snow, Xenogen created a green energy shield around itself just like its opponent had done a couple seconds ago. Ice and frost began to gather around it, but the Mutant Pokemon was protected. However, as Frosthra used the powerful Ice-type move, he slowly floated closer and closer to the Nuclear-type Pokemon.

Frosthra's attack came to an end, and so did Xenogen's Protect.

"Now use Shadow Claw!" Ash said, thrusting a fist forward.

"What?" Alain asked. "Xenogen, dodge it!"

The Frost Moth Pokemon lunged forward, one of his front claws coated in grayish black ghostly energy. Xenogen tried to move back, but mobility wasn't the Mutant Pokemon's forte, and the strike connected, sending Xenogen tumbling backwards.

"And Signal Beam again, before it can recover!" Ash quickly added.

From between his antennae, Frosthra launched a second multicolored beam at the still recovering Nuclear-type Pokemon. Given that it had used Protect just now, a second Protect was unlikely to work. Still, Alain was a resourceful trainer, and it was

unlikely that he would bet everything on Protect. An assumption that proved true by his next command.

"Double Team!"

In an instant, a multitude of Xenogen clones littered the battlefield, one of them disappearing after being struck by Frosthra's Signal Beam. The obfuscated Frost Moth Pokemon began to look around, seeing nothing but Xenogen wherever he looked.

"Stay calm and don't let it confuse you! Dispel the copies with Blizzard!" Ash said.

"Fro, frosthra!" Frosthra chirped in agreement, as he gained a little altitude and began to beat his wings, producing a powerful freezing wind that Frosthra blew in a wide arc, quickly dispelling the copies around it.

"Xenogen, Flamethrower!" Alain shouted.

With only a couple copies remaining, the real Xenogen exhaled a stream of orange flames from its tentacle-covered mouth. The flames quickly cut through the blizzard, melting the ice chunks into water and evaporating said water into steam almost instantly, dangerously getting close to the Frost Moth Pokemon.

"Dodge it, quickly!" Ash urged. "And get closer to Xenogen!"

Thanks to Frosthra's altitude, he was able to avoid the stream of flames with greater ease than if he were closer to the ground, while also slowly bridging the distance between them.

"Radioacid!" Alain commanded. The tubes connecting to the Nuclear Pokemon's neck began to bulge as fluid was pumped through them,

"Use Protect and keep getting closer!" Ash said.

As the Mutant Pokemon sprayed forward a cone of highly corrosive chemicals, Frosthra encased himself inside an energy bubble while

flying closer to his opponent. For the second time, the green glowing liquid splashed against the barrier while leaving the Bug and Ice-type inside unharmed. The Protect vanished just as Frosthra reached Xenogen.

"Gamma Ray!" Alain shouted.

"Fly upwards and dodge it!" Ash shouted back.

Frosthra used his building momentum to move upwards, narrowly dodging the green energy beam.

"Time for String Shot! Aim for the tail!" Ash ordered. "And tie it to its head!"

Before Alain or Xenogen had any time to react, Frosthra spat a sticky thread from his hidden mouth which was attached to the tail of the Mutant Pokemon. He then tugged back, pulling Xenogen's tail against its head, and quickly spun around his enemy, tying the tail and head together.

"No! Quick Xenogen, try to break free!" Alain commanded.

The Mutant Pokemon tried to break the sticky thread, but in its position it was easier said than done.

"Whoa! I didn't even know you could use String Shot like that!" Mairin said, her worry over Alain being on the losing side being momentarily surpassed by amazement at Ash's strategies.

Serena smiled in vicarious pride. "Yeah, Ash is really good at coming up with unorthodox ways to use some moves!"

"Now Frosthra, fly over Xenogen, and another Blizzard from above!" Ash commanded.

"Xenogen, Protect again!" Alain shouted.

Hovering above the Mutant Pokemon, Frosthra began to beat his wings for the third time, raining a storm of ice chunks and snow upon the immobilized Nuclear-type. Still, Xenogen was able to cast Protect, shielding itself from the powerful Ice-type move. Ash, however, didn't seem to be fazed over the fact that his attack had been foiled yet another time.

Serena soon realized why: while Xenogen was protected from the attack, all the ice and snow was piling up around him, forming a growing, frozen prison around it. When the attack was over, Xenogen was entirely encased in ice.

"Xenogen, use Flamethrower to destroy the ice! It should also burn the sticky strings binding you!" Alain commanded.

A red glow came from within the ice prison before a fiery explosion destroyed the makeshift prison, shattering and melting the ice at the same time, while releasing Xenogen from its bindings.

"Frosthra, now! Signal Beam!" Ash said with a vigorous arm motion.

Alain's eyes grew wide, realizing what Ash had been doing. "Avoid it with Double Team, quickly!"

A multicolored beam fell from above directly on top of Xenogen, who was a bit dazed from the explosion caused by its flamethrower, and was unable to carry out Alain's orders in time, and was blasted backwards by the Bug-type attack.

"Xenogen!" Alain cried upon seeing his Pokemon rolling backwards.

"And follow up with Shadow Claw!" Ash shouted.

"Froooo... !" Frosthra dashed at Xenogen, both his front claws coated in ghostly energy, and delivered a mighty ascending swipe at the Nuclear-type Pokemon right on the face, sending Xenogen flying into the air a short distance.

The Mutant Pokemon landed on the ground with a soft thud. It made no attempt to get back to its feet.

Clemont raised an arm in Ash's direction. "Xenogen is unable to battle! The winner is Frosthra!"

"Fro, fros!" Frosthra cheered as he turned towards Ash and his teammates and waved at them in joy.

"Great job, Frosthra!" Ash said, with the rest of his Pokemon, even Dunseraph, crying in support of their friend.

Needless to say, Serena and Bonnie also cheered over Ash's first victory, while Mairin slumped on her seat, sad over Alain's loss.

Alain merely returned the defeated Nuclear-type to its pokeball, smiling slightly. "Thank you, Xenogen. Take a rest," Alain said, buckling the pokeball to his belt. "You haven't been wasting your time, Ash. I can tell you got even better since the last time we fought."

"The first time I was caught off guard since I had never seen a Nuclear-type before," Ash said, as his gaze turned fierce. "But since then, I have fought countless Nuclear-type Pokemon! Me and my team have gotten much better at dealing with them."

"I see. Alright, in that case, you may find this Pokemon a more suitable challenge," Alain said without even looking at the Pokemon behind him. "Jungore, go!"

A Pokemon none of them had seen before walked into the battleground. It was a reptile that walked on four legs. Its body was rocky brown with a purple underbelly, but its front legs, lower jaw, spiked crest over its head and the tip of its tail looked to be made of solid gold.

"Huh, a new Pokemon," Ash said, pulling out his Pokedex.

"Jungore, the Gold Ingot Pokemon. Fighting/Rock. Its hide is studded with pieces of solid gold. Because of how valuable this Pokémon is on the black market, its population dwindled until it became extinct in the wild." The Pokedex explained.

"It became extinct?" Bonnie repeated, the implication of how Alain could have one unsaid.

"This Jungore was revived from a fossil I found while exploring a cave," Alain explained. "They don't exist in the wild anymore, but many scientists are trying to breed them in enough numbers before releasing them into the wild."

Serena's mind went to those scientists in Kalos who bred Aurorus and Tyrantrum, two Pokemon also extinct that no longer existed in the wild.

"Frosthra versus Jungore, begin!" Clemont said, lowering both arms in a chopping motion.

"Jungore, begin with Rock Slide!" Alain quickly ordered.

"Dodge it and use Blizzard!" Ash said just as quickly.

"Juuu... !" Jungore cried as it summoned several large boulders above Frosthra.

Gravity did its part, and the rocks began to fall down on the Frost Moth Pokemon. However, thanks to Ash's warning, he was ready and dodged all of them. Once the last boulder passed by him, he began to beat his wings, producing a gust of freezing wind with snow and ice shards.

"Dodge it with Dig, quickly!" Alain ordered.

"Ju, jungo!" Jungore cried as it burrowed underground, seconds before the Blizzard covered in ice the spot it was on.

"Cover the area in ice, Frosthra! Don't let it come out near you!" Ash said.

"Fro, frosthra!" Frosthra chirped, as he began to flap his wings even faster, as he slowly covered the area below him in solid ice. When Jungore would try to come out, the layer of ice would act as an additional obstacle that would make it wide open and ripe for a strike.

Or at least, that was the plan.

"Jungore, break through the ice with Brick Break!" Alain ordered.

There was an explosion of ice under Frosthra as Jungore burst from underground, sending small chunks of ice in every direction. Its front legs were glowing white with the power of the Fighting-type move, which still had enough energy to attack the Ice and Bug-type Pokemon directly.

"Frosthra, Protect!" Ash cried.

However, the order came too late, and the moment Jungore reached Frosthra, it delivered a powerful swipe with its glowing arms made of solid gold, sending the Frost Moth Pokemon spiraling down.

"Frosthra!" Ash cried.

"Now use Rock Slide one more time!" Alain shouted, throwing a punch forward.

"Jungo!" Jungore cried, summoning another batch of large boulders above Frosthra the moment Ash's Pokemon crashed against the icy ground.

"Frosthra, get out of there, quickly!" Ash urged.

But Frosthra was still reeling from Jungore's unexpected attack, and was unable to move as fast as he needed. The boulders rained upon Frosthra, smashing into him with painful thudding noises.

"Frosthra!" Ash cried again.

When the boulders vanished, Ash could see Frosthra: his body was covered in bruises, his wings mangled and cracked, and his eyes were rolled back.

"Frosthra is unable to battle! Jungore is the winner!" Clemont declared, raising an arm in Alain's direction.

"Yes! Well done, Alain!" Mairin cheered, while Bonnie pouted and slumped on her seat. It was amazing how the two girls' moods had switched in such a short amount of time.

"Aw, Ash lost the advantage. And Frosthra wasn't even able to land a single hit on Jungore..." Bonnie lamented.

"Goes to show how strong Alain is as a trainer," Serena admitted.

"Well done, Frosthra. Take a good rest," Ash said, recalling his defeated Pokemon back to his pokeball. "Now, which one of you could I-"

Before Ash could choose his next pick, there was a crackling sound, following Jungore glowing a bright bluish white light, as it began to grow and change form, going from four legs to standing up on two.

"Whoa, look at that!" Mairin squealed. "It's evolving!"

"Aw come on! That's not fair!" Bonnie protested.

"Don't say that, Bonnie. Ash has benefitted from evolution in the middle of a match before," Serena told the younger girl. "Remember the matches against Davern and Cali?"

Bonnie crossed her arms and pouted even more. "... but it sucks when it happens to Ash's opponents..."

Once the process was complete, the light faded, revealing the newly evolved Pokemon. It was much larger and stood on two legs. Its

body was still rocky brown, but it was now covered by a black shell of stone that only left its arms and legs bare, with a large hunch on its back. Its golden forearms had grown into massive ingots of gold, while a golden helmet with several protrusions covered its head, leaving only its eyes exposed.

Ash and Serena both pulled out their pokedex to scan the new Pokemon: *"Majungold, the Gold Bar Pokemon, and Jungore's evolution. Fighting/Rock. Its enormously heavy arms are made of solid gold. This Pokémon has developed extraordinarily strong muscles to hold them up."*

Ash looked at the newly evolved Pokemon, and after a couple seconds of thinking over it, he decided who was going to be his next battler.

"Alright, my next Pokemon is Dunseraph!" Ash declared.

"Duuuun... !" Dunseraph cried as he flew towards the battleground, placing himself between Ash and Majungold. He also beat his wings with more force than necessary in order to blow some wind onto Majungold and Alain's face. The former appeared annoyed, but the latter didn't react.

"That's quite the impressive Pokemon, Ash," Alain said, taking a look at Dunseraph. "May I ask where did you find it? So far, I have only seen another trainer with one, and its power was incredible."

"Oh, you already saw this Pokemon before, Alain. Remember the Dunsparce I used during our bout in Comet Port?" Ash asked. "Well, this is him now!"

"Dun, dunseraph!" Dunseraph proudly cried.

"Amazing. I wasn't aware that Dunsparce could evolve," Alain said, before his lips curved into a confident smirk. "But evolution or not, Majungold will be the one walking out with a victory!"

"Ma, majun!" Majungold cried in agreement, slamming his two golden ingots against each other in a threatening fashion.

"We'll see about that," Ash replied, just as confident-

"Dunseraph versus Majungold, begin!" Clemont said, resuming the match.

"Majungold, begin with Rock Slide!" Alain began.

"Counter with Dragon Pulse, Dunseraph!" Ash replied.

"Jun!"

"Ser!"

As Majungold raised its arms and summoned several boulders above Dunseraph, the God Snake Pokemon opened his mouth and released a dragon-shaped beam of swirling purples, pinks and magentas. The Dragon-type move was able to destroy half the boulders, but the other half found their mark.

"Duuun... !" Dunseraph cried upon taking some of the super effective attack.

"Dunseraph!" Ash yelled.

The dragon shook his head to shake off the pain, and glared at Majungold. Thankfully, the revived fossil would need more than that to take him out.

"Why did Ash tell Dunseraph to do that? Wouldn't it be better to just dodge?" Bonnie asked.

Serena pondered Bonnie's question for a moment, putting a finger under her chin. "I guess that Dunseraph's too big and not fast enough to dodge an attack like that. Then again, Ash could have ordered Dunseraph to use Dig..."

"Okay, Alain got a hit, but that means nothing! Dragon Pulse one more time!" Ash ordered.

"Seraaaaa... !" Dunseraph cried as he opened his mouth, a second dragon-shaped beam of swirling violets and amethysts coming from it and barreling towards Majungold.

"Dodge it with Dig, Majungold!" Alain ordered.

Majungold jumped into the air before turning into a living drill, burrowing into the ground just as the Dragon-type attack passed by, avoiding it. Despite missing, Ash smirked confidently.

"I knew you'd do that. Dunseraph, use Dig yourself too and bring Majungold back to the surface!" Ash ordered.

"What?" Alain asked.

Dunseraph nodded, and dived down as he began to spin like a drill, just like his opponent had done before, digging underground. After a few seconds, the ground began to shake, followed by an underground explosion that threw small chunks of rock and dirt in every direction, caused by Dunseraph violently sending Majungold upwards.

"Yes! Well done, Dunseraph!" Ash cheered.

"Majungold!" Alain cried upon seeing the Gold Bar Pokemon launched into the air, before falling to the ground with a loud and painful sounding thud. "Majungold, are you okay?"

The Rock and Fighting-type Pokemon groaned as it got back to its feet, using its oversized solid gold forearms to push itself up.

"Ma, maju!" Majungold replied.

"Alright. Let's go with another Rock Slide!" Alain said.

"Maju, gold!" Majungold said, summoning another cluster of boulders above the God Snake Pokemon.

"Let's try Ancient Power this time, Dunseraph!" Ash suggested.

As the boulders formed above him, Dunseraph summoned a spinning ring of golden orbs which quickly grew into rocks of the same color, and threw them upwards just as the Rock Slide came down. Rock smashed against rock, shattering each other in a rain of brown and golden pebbles. This time, though, no part of the Rock Slide ever touched Dunseraph.

A golden aura flashed over Dunseraph's body for a second.

"Yes!" Ash cheered again. "It worked!"

"What? What worked?" Mairin asked, a little confused.

"Ancient Power's additional effect. It has a small chance to boost every attribute of a Pokemon when used," Serena explained.

"But thanks to his ability, said chance becomes much bigger!" Bonnie chimed in.

"So Dunseraph can get stronger every time he uses that move? Oh no!" Mairin said, taking her hands to her head. "Be careful, Alain!"

"Don't worry, Ash is going to need a little more than a lucky boost to defeat us," Alain confidently stated.

"How about we try a second time, then? Ancient Power again, Dunseraph!" Ash commanded.

"Dun, duns!" Dunseraph cried, as he summoned another ring of golden rocks around him. This time, the golden rocks were a little larger than before.

"First of all, let's bridge the gap in power! Majungold, use Bulk Up followed by Brick Break!" Alain ordered.

"Majuuuuu... !" Majungold began, flexing its oversized arms as his body briefly glowed with a fiery red aura. Dunseraph then launched the barrage of golden rocks, which Majungold began to shatter with precise strikes of his gigantic arms, reducing the stones to rubble.

Fortunately for Alain, the Ancient Power's additional effect wasn't triggered this time around. Unfortunately for Alain, Ash wasn't planning on giving him any time to breathe.

"Alright Dunseraph, let's go with Sky Fall!" Ash shouted.

Dunseraph beat his wings as he gained altitude, before coating himself in swirling, pressurized air and diving at Majungold, blowing gusts of wind in every direction as he moved.

"Don't let that attack touch you, Majungold!" Alain spoke as if he had seen that attack before, not unusual given that he was familiar with Dunseraph. "Use Dig!"

For the second time in the match, Majungold turned into a living drill as it burrowed underground, just as Dunseraph passed by it, blowing wind in every direction.

"Now come out and use Ice Punch!" Alain quickly commanded.

Mjungold came out from the ground like a missile, barreling towards Dunseraph with both forearms covered in frost, slamming one of them into the large dragon's body.

"Sееееer... !" Dunseraph cried in pain.

"Dunseraph!" Ash cried.

"Let's keep the pressure on, Majungold! Rock Slide!" Alain energetically shouted, as he made a quick arm motion.

"Maju!" Majungold cried as it summoned another bunch of giant rocks over Dunseraph, these ones noticeably larger than the previous ones thanks to the boost provided by Bulk Up.

"Dunseraph, dodge them, quickly!" Ash commanded.

As the rocks rained over him for a third time, Dunseraph began to fly down and, fittingly, twisted and turned like a snake, avoiding the falling boulders with a speed and grace he didn't possess a few minutes ago, making Serena realize that the speed boost from Ancient Power had allowed him to dodge an attack that he couldn't have before.

"Now that he's wide open, go for another Ice Punch!" Alain commanded.

"Ma, maju!" Majungold cried, slamming both arms of solid gold together, before they were cloaked in a freezing aura, and dashed towards Dunseraph.

"Block it with Poison Jab, Dunseraph!" Ash cried.

As Majungold came closer, Dunseraph's drill-shaped tail began to glow with a deep purple light, before using said tail to parry the incoming freezing punch. Both attacks met in the middle, the resulting clash pushing both Pokemon backwards.

"M-Maj!" Majungold winced, as its body flashed purple for a second before coughing purple bubbles.

"Poisoned?" Alain asked.

"Yay! Serene Grace for the win!" Bonnie cheered.

"Great job, Dunseraph! Now Dragon Pulse! And be ready just in case it uses Dig!" Ash warned him.

"Duuuuun-SERAPH!" Dunseraph cried, firing another swirling purple and magenta energy beam shaped like a dragon.

"We're not some one-trick Ponyta! Majungold, Ice Punch into the spot in front of you!" Alain ordered.

A freezing aura appeared around the bars of solid gold that Majungold had for arms before slamming the two of them into the ground, producing a massive iceberg in front of it, and winced upon being hurt by the poison. The Dragon Pulse slammed into a mass of ice, shattering its upper part but unable to reach Alain's Pokemon.

"Well done Majungold! Now Brick Break into the remains of the iceberg! Launch the ice chunks at Dunseraph!" Alain commanded, energized by the prospect of recovering lost ground.

"Dunseraph, get closer with Sky Fall!" Ash commanded.

As Dunseraph covered himself in a cloak of pressurized air and dived at Majungold, the Gold Bar Pokemon began to relentlessly punch the iceberg, shattering it with each impact and sending the shards flying at Dunseraph. The God Snake Pokemon tried to dodge them as best as he could, but even with his enhanced speed it was difficult to do so while flying towards his enemy, meaning that he had to endure some impacts.

However, Dunseraph's gamble paid off and the dragon struck the fossil, sending it flying backwards, before landing on the grassy ground on its back.

"Majungold!" Alain cried. "Are you okay?"

With great difficulty, Majungold climbed back to his feet. His breath was heavy and was having trouble standing on his two feet, but it seemed the Pokemon still wanted to fight. That's it, until his body flashed purple for a second and the Rock and Fighting-type Pokemon fell victim to a coughing fit, before finally falling to the ground facefirst.

This time, it didn't make an effort to stand up.

Clemont raised a hand in Ash's direction. "Majungold is unable to battle! The winner is Dunseraph!"

"Yes! Great job, Dunseraph!" Ash cried, pumping his fist.

All of Ash's Pokemon behind him cried happily for their teammates' victory, while Dunseraph fired a Dragon Pulse into the air in a boastful manner.

"Yes! Another victory for Ash!" Bonnie cheered. "One more, and he'll finally beat Alain!"

"Don't count Alain out so soon!" Mairin replied, crossing his arms. "He still can win this. He has made comebacks under much worse odds!"

Speaking of which, the black haired teen returned his defeated fossil to its pokeball. "Thank you, Majungold. Take a rest," Alain said, before turning back and scanning his remaining Pokemon. With a thoughtful hum, Alain made his choice. "Alright, Voltasu, time for you to battle!"

"Vo, volt!" the Three Legged Pokemon cawed as it flew to the battleground, and glared at Dunseraph. The dragon returned said glare with a taunting smirk.

"Have you seen this Pokemon before? You seemed to be familiar with it," Alain pointed out.

"Yeah. One of Serena's contest rivals has one and used it in a contest more than once," Ash explained. "I may not have fought against one myself, but I'm aware of what it can do."

Alain's lips curved into a smirk. "I look forward to surprising you, then."

"Dunseraph versus Voltasu, begin!" Clemont said, resuming the match.

"Dunseraph, begin with Ancient Power!" Ash shouted.

"Take it and use Thunder Wave!" Alain commanded.

As Dunseraph summoned a spinning ring of large glowing rocks, Voltasu's body began to crackle with yellow electricity. The golden boulders flew at Voltasu, all of them hitting the Electric and Flying-type Pokemon, while at the same time Voltasu sent rings of yellow electricity at Dunseraph, who flinched and cried in discomfort when the attack took effect.

"Yes! Paralyzed!" Mairin cheered.

"That won't stop us! Dunseraph, Dragon Pulse!" Ash shouted.

"Dodge it and counter with Thunder!" Alain ordered.

Dunseraph fired a purple and magenta dragon-shaped beam of energy at Voltasu, who was able to dodge it with ease by flying upwards. As it did, its body was cloaked in a coat of yellow electricity, before releasing all of it in the form of a massive, single bolt that hit Dunseraph head on.

"Duuuuun... !" he cried in pain.

"Dunseraph, hold on!" Ash tried to encourage his Pokemon. "Dragon Pulse again!"

Struggling against the paralysis, Dunseraph opened his mouth and fired another beam of draconic power at his opponent. But he was too slow to do so, and Voltasu dodged the attack without much trouble.

"Now get closer and use Dragon Rage!" Alain instructed.

"Dodge it with Dig!" Ash replied.

Dunseraph dived towards the ground as he began to spin like a drill, but he suddenly stopped all of sudden as his body fell prey to a series of spasms. This gave Voltasu more than enough time to get closer to Dunseraph, and the God Snake Pokemon was engulfed by a sea of dark blue and purple flames.

"Se-seraaaaph!" Dunseraph cried in pain as he fell to the ground.

"Dunseraph!" Ash shouted.

Dunseraph slammed against the grass below with a thundering noise, the impact raising a cloud of dirt and dust. When the cloud dispelled, they could see Dunseraph sprawled on the ground, immobile.

"Dunseraph is unable to battle! The winner is Voltasu!" Clemont said, raising an arm in Alain's direction.

"Yes! Awesome job, Alain!" Mairin cheered, pumping both fists into the air. The teen boy smiled in return.

"You were amazing out there, Dunseraph. Take a good rest," Ash said, returning his defeated dragon. The raven haired teen turned back at his remaining Pokemon, wondering who he should pick for his last choice. He didn't take long to make a decision. "Alright Raptorch, I choose you!"

"Ra, rap!" Raptorch happily yipped, as he hopped towards the battleground.

"Raptorch? I thought Ash would choose a heavy hitter like Metalynx," Bonnie said, raising an eyebrow.

"Raptorch's choice makes sense," Serena replied. "Being part Ground-type, he's immune to Voltasu's electric attacks, so there's no danger of being paralyzed."

"Hmmm," Bonnie hummed and nodded in understanding.

"Raptorch versus Voltasu! Whoever wins this battle will win the match!" Clemont said, lowering both arms in a chopping motion. "Begin!"

"Raptorch, Flamethrower!" Ash commanded.

"Counter it with Thunder!" Alain replied.

Raptorch took a deep breath before releasing a powerful stream of flames from his open jaws at Voltasu, while the Three Legged Pokemon charged his body with electricity and released it in the form of a powerful lightning bolt, aimed not at Raptorch, but at its attack. The two moves met in the middle, resulting in a deafening explosion.

"Now, Aerial Ace!" Alain commanded.

"Repel it with Brick Break!" Ash shouted.

Fast as lightning, Voltasu pierced through the cloud of smoke, splitting it in two, as it flew headfirst towards Raptorch, its long, black wing glowing with a white light, while Raptorch's tail glowed the same color. Wing met tail, the impact sending both Pokemon backwards, but Raptorch was thrown with greater force than Voltasu.

"Now, Dragon Rage!" Alain ordered.

"Use Flame Impact to dodge it and get close to Voltasu!" Ash said.

"Vooooool!" Voltasu screeched, before opening its beak wide and releasing a torrent of dark blue and purple flames.

"Rap, raptorch!" Raptorch yipped as his entire body was coated in flames, before shooting forward like a missile. However, he was able to move aside in order to dodge the stream of draconic flames, before smashing into the Three Legged Pokemon, smacking it backwards.

"Now, Flamethrower! It won't be able to dodge from up close!" Ash urged Raptorch.

"Stop him with Aerial Ace!" Alain shouted, making a swift arm motion.
"Use it non-stop!"

Raptorch took a deep breath, but before he could release all the fire building in his belly, Voltasu's both wings glowed with a white light

and used them to repeatedly smack Raptorch in the face, pushing him backwards with each swipe and preventing the Fire Dino Pokemon from using said move. The last wing slap was so strong, it sent Raptorch tumbling backwards.

"Raptorch!" Ash cried upon seeing his Pokemon taking such a beating.

Alain, however, wasn't planning on losing his advantage. "Well done Voltasu! Now follow up with Air Slash!"

"Raptorch, quickly, dodge with Dig!" Ash countered.

Voltasu flew a little higher and began flapping its wings relentlessly, sending a barrage of blades of pressurized air at Raptorch. However, they never reached their target as the Fire Dino Pokemon burrowed underground just in time to avoid them.

"That won't work again! Voltasu, use Thunder on the ground itself! Tear it apart and force Raptorch out!" Alain commanded.

"No! Raptroch, quick, come out!" Ash cried.

Voltasu, whose body was crackling with rapidly building electricity, hovered above the hole Raptorch had disappeared into, before releasing the stored up charge in the form of a massive electric blast into the ground, breaking it open and sending rocks, pebbles and dirt flying in every direction. And among the rocks and the dirt was also Raptorch, who was blasted into the air.

"Follow up with Air Slash now that he can't dodge!" Alain mercilessly ordered.

"Vo, volta!" Voltasu cawed, as it began to flap its wings a second time in order to produce another barrage of air blades that this time found their mark.

"RAAAAA!" Raptorch cried in pain before landing painfully on the ground.

"Raptorch, are you okay!?" Ash asked, his voice carrying a nervous edge. "Raptorch!"

"Raaaa..." Raptorch groaned, as he slowly climbed back to his feet and shook his head to shake off the dazing. He glared at Voltasu.

Then, there was a crackling noise, and Raptorch's entire body glowed brightly with an intense blueish-white light.

"Whoa, look at that!" Bonnie said, pointing at the glowing dinosaur. "Raptorch is evolving!"

"So now it's not unfair, right?" Mairin grumbled, crossing her arms in annoyance at both Ash's luck and Bonnie's reaction.

Raptorch's shape remained the same as he evolved, the transformation merely causing him to grow in size and made his body slender and his limbs longer. Then, the light of evolution went out, allowing everybody to see the new Pokemon.

"Ar, archi!" the new Pokemon cried, his voice sounding like a low pitched whistle.

Both Ash and Serena took out their Pokedex in order to learn what this Pokemon was.

"Archilles, the Fire Raptor Pokemon, and Raptorch's evolution. Fire/Ground. With a specialized saddle and reins, Achilles can be ridden. Make sure that you have earned its trust first."

In general terms, Achilles looked mostly like a bigger version of Raptorch, though there were some differences: his skull was longer, and so was his tail, which had red feathers to the sides and a fan of red feathers at the end of it. His teeth and claws were longer, and had fire coming out of his elbows, knees and the end of his tail.

"Chil, chille!" Archilled growled, letting out a puff of flames.

"Yes! Awesome, Archilles! Now there's nothing that can stop us!" Ash cheered.

"Just when I think I have you against the ropes, you come back from the brink even stronger," Alain said, closing his eyes and shaking his head. His eyes then shot open, a glint of excitement visible on them. "But this is why I like battling against you so much! Come on Voltasu, Dragon Rage!"

"Dodge it and use Flame Impact!" Ash replied.

Voltasu sent another torrent of blue and amethyst flames in Archilles direction. The newly evolved Pokemon flexed his longer and stronger hind legs, and easily leaped above the Dragon-type attack. As he was mid-air, the flames on his elbows, knees and tail began to grow and spread around his body, covering him in a cloak of flames, before shooting like a fiery missile at Voltasu.

"Voltasu, get out of the way!" Alain commanded.

But Voltasu was unable to match the temporary speed boost granted by Flame Impact. Archilles' blazing body slammed into the Three Legged Pokemon, sending it tumbling backwards.

"Excellent! Now Brick Break!" Ash ordered.

"Parry it with Aerial Ace!" Alain shouted.

Once again, Archilles leaped into the air, making a frontal somersault in order to deliver a vertical chopping strike with his white glowing tail, while Voltasu's wings began to glow with a white light. Tail met wings, and unlike the previous time where Voltasu won the struggle, this time the two Pokemon appeared to be evenly matched.

"Keep going on, Archilles!" Ash shouted.

"You too, Voltasu!" Alain replied.

The two Pokemon continued to trade tail slaps and wing strikes, the two unable to land a hit on the other. That was, until Archilles misstepped and fumbled his attack, allowing Voltasu to deliver a powerful wing strike to his face that sent him rolling backwards.

"Yes! Direct hit!" Mairin cheered. "Way to go, Alain and Voltasu!"

"Archilles!" Ash cried.

Fortunately for Ash, Archilles wasn't down for the count, as the Fire Raptor Pokemon managed to get back on his feet, even if he struggled to do so. Then, Archilles glared at Voltasu with glowing orange eyes that looked like burning coals, and a burning red aura enveloped him, while the parts of his body that were on fire burned with far more intensity.

"Oh, what now? Is he going to evolve again?" Mairin protested.

"No, that's Blaze," Serena pointed out. "Archilles is on his last legs, but his fire attacks will be now more potent. One way or another, the next couple moves will decide the victor of this match."

"Come on Archilles, Flamethrower!" Ash commanded, his voice dripping with nervousness and excitement, since he knew the match was reaching its climax.

"Counter with Dragon Rage!" Alain told his Pokemon.

Once again, Voltasu released a stream of dark blue and magenta flames from its beak at Archilles, while the Tandorian starter opened his mouth and exhaled not so much flames, but what appeared to be red hot plasma. The empowered Flamethrower cut through the Dragon Rage as if it was nothing, engulfing the Electric and Flying-type Pokemon inside a sea of raging fires.

"Vol, voltaaaaaaaa!" Voltasu cried, as it tried to get away from the burning torrent.

"Time to finish this! Archilles, Flame Impact!" Ash ordered, throwing a punch forward.

"Air Slash!" Alain commanded.

Once again, the fire around Archilles spread around his body, encasing him into a blazing cloak, before shooting towards Voltasu, leaving a trail of burning grass in his wake. Voltasu, meanwhile, flew into the air and began flapping its wings, pouring the last of its remaining strength into the attack. The blades of wind all crashed into Archilles, but they failed to stop his advance, and the Fire Raptor Pokemon slammed into his opponent, resulting in a fiery explosion that raised a huge cloud of dust and dirt.

"Voltasu!"

"Archilles!"

As the cloud dispelled, everybody held their breath, worried to see which of the two Pokemon had come out on top.

The answer was none, as the two Pokemon were sprawled on the ground, eyes swirly and bodies completely motionless.

"Uh... both Archilles and Voltasu are unable to battle. And since neither trainer has more Pokemon, the result is a tie!" Clemont declared.

There was a brief lull as everybody processed what Clemont had just said. Clearly everybody found such a result to be unlikely, and felt a bit underwhelmed over it, Serena included. The honey blonde was hoping that Ash would finally beat Alain this time. But alas, a tie was the best they could do.

Something the raven haired teen appeared to be okay with, given that he was smiling brightly, and the same was true for his opponent.

"Amazing battle, Ash. You always go beyond my expectations, and they are pretty big to begin with," Alain said, as he recalled his defeated Voltasu.

"Yeah, I had a great time as well battling you," Ash said, also recalling Archilles.

"You got really strong since the last time we fought," Alain praised him.

"Not as much as you think. Had Archilles not evolved, maybe you would have won," Ash replied.

"Well, my Majungold also evolved over the course of the match, so that makes us even," Alain insisted. "Though, how come you didn't use Pikachu? I believe he would have been a pretty good match against Voltasu."

"Oh, well..." Ash said, growing a little uneasy. Pikachu lowered his head, his ears dropping down. "You see, Pikachu can't fight for the time being, due to an... injury he got fighting Nuclear Pokemon."

Mairin gasped, and covered her mouth with her hands. "Oh my goodness, that's terrible!"

"Oh. I'm very sorry to hear that," Alain said, now sounding a little regretful over asking that. "I'm sorry if it was a sensitive topic, it's that... Well, Pikachu looked good to me."

"Yeah, on the outside he looks great, but he can't afford to exert himself much," Ash said. "But I'm sure that with enough rest, he'll be back in business in no time."

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu nodded.

"Well, now that the match is over," Clemont began. "How about we give your fainted Pokemon some medicine and food to get them back in shape, and relax a little?"

"That's a great idea," Alain agreed.

...

After the match was over, everybody did what Clemont suggested and used some medicine to heal the Pokemon who had fought, and after that, the two groups settled in and simply engaged in conversation with one another as the Pokemon relaxed.

Needless to say, Ash and Alain were mostly interested in the new Pokemon the other had caught. Ash explained how he had captured Orchynx and Raptorch, and how the former had evolved into Metalynx during the battle of Bealbeach City, and how Dunsparce had evolved into Dunseraph after the battle against Tiko.

On Alain's end, there were only two Pokemon Ash hadn't seen, the first one being the weird and creepy looking Pokemon that Alain was using in his spar against Mairin.

"Chainite, the Retribution Pokemon, and Linkite's evolution. Ghost/Dark. A malicious and dangerous Pokémon, it seeks revenge against the trainer who abandoned it. Its shackles were reinforced in order to keep its violent nature under control." The Pokedex explained.

"Well, it's a good thing that I have never ever abandoned a Pokemon, and never will," Alain stated matter-o-factly.

"Too bad there are some people out there who don't think like us," Ash said, remembering all the callous trainers he had met across his journey who did exactly that.

The other Pokemon, which kinda stood out a little among the rest of Alain's team, was a Tricwe.

"A scientist working for Professor Cypress gave me this little guy as part of an experiment the last time I was on Rochfale, less than a week ago," Alain explained to the group as he gently patted the

small Bug-type. "Currently Tricwe's only known evolution is Harylect, but the scientist I talked to hypothesized that under the right circumstances, Tricwe might have more evolutions besides that one. He just needed a trainer to help her evolve."

"Really? That's fascinating. I hope that scientist is right. If he's right, you'll be remembered as somebody who discovered a new evolution!" Clemont said, excited by the prospect.

"I'm only doing the grunt work. It was the scientists who did all the important labor," Alain replied. "But one way or another, I'm more than happy to help."

Ash and his friends stayed with Alain and Mairin for a couple more hours. After that, at Ash's request, the group decided to continue their journey, since Ash wanted to be at Venesi City by the next day. According to Alain, if they kept a good pace, they'd be able to arrive at Venesi City sometime before sunset.

The two groups bid each other goodbye, while Alain and Ash hoped to see each other again at the League.

...

The very next morning, Alain made a decision.

"Pack your things. I think we already trained enough. I believe it's time to finally go to Tsukinami Village," Alain declared.

"Oh? I thought we were going to spend at least one more week here," Mairin asked, raising an eyebrow. "So, do you feel ready now?"

"I think I've been ready for quite some time," Alain told her, as he began to put his belongings inside his backpack. "I think facing no opponent of Ash's caliber for so long made me a little lethargic."

"And fighting Ash woke you up?" the redhead asked.

Alain couldn't help but smile softly. "Whenever I fight against Ash... he manages to ignite a flame inside me no one else has been able to. His passion is simply contagious."

Mairin snorted a little. "You know, the way you talked about Ash..." she began.

"Yes?" Alain asked, looking at her quizzically.

"I mean... should I warn Serena that you're going after her crush?" Mairin merrily asked in a mocking tone, before giggling a little. "You know I'm on your side, but on this issue I'm kinda rooting for her and Ash to hook up."

"You must think you're so funny, don't you?" Alain said, rolling his eyes, but his smile didn't disappear. "Anyway, get ready for-"

"Heeeeeeeey!" Somebody called from afar. "Heeeeeeeey!"

Alain and Mairin stopped what they were doing, and looked in the direction of the voice: it was a brown haired boy, probably around Ash's age, who ran at them waving his arms.

"Do you know him?" Mairin whispered at Alain, who shook his head.

"He looks to be a bit distressed," Alain noted, as the boy came closer.

"Oh thank goodness there's somebody here!" the boy said upon finally reaching the duo. "Please I need your help! My Pokemon! It-"

"First of all, calm down. Breathe," Alain instructed, placing a hand on the agitated boy. "Okay, now tell me what happened. Is your Pokemon in trouble?"

"Y-yes! It fell down a grotto under a tree, and it can't climb back! Please help it out!" the boy pleaded.

"Of course. Take us where your Pokemon is. I'm sure one of ours will be more than able to help it out," Alain offered.

"Oh thank you, thank you, thank you!" the boy said, bowing repeatedly. "I've been looking for anybody to help for hours around this place and found no one! I was about to give up until I met you two!"

"Hey, it's okay. We aren't going to turn down anybody in need of help," Mairin said, smiling at him as a way to calm him down. "Oh, by the way, we haven't introduced each other! I'm Mairin, and this is Alain."

"My name's Maury," the boy said. "Come here, this is where my Pokemon is trapped..."

The duo didn't say anything, and followed Maury's lead.

Author's Note: Well, it's been a while since Alain appeared, so it was about time for him to make a return, didn't it? This chapter also helps show the rest of his team. We see how his Xenomite and Linkite evolved offscreen, plus he got a Jungore (which also evolved as you saw here) and a Voltasu on top of Charizard. Oh, and a Tricwe too, but it's not like such an insignificant Pokemon will be relevant later, right?

Sorry if any of you were hoping that Ash would beat him this time around. Oh well, even if it was with the help of a mid-battle evolution, at least this time he scored a tie. Though, all I'm asking you is to be a little patient. Good things come for those who know to wait ;)

While I'm not fan of having mid-battle evolutions, I was having a hard time finding a good place and moment for Raptorch to evolve, so in the end I decided that a friendly spar was better than an important battle like a Gym or League match. And with this evolution, Ash's team is finally fully evolved.

And speaking of returns, Maury makes his after almost forty chapters. Bet all of you forgot about him, huh?

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Next chapter, our heroes arrive to Venesi City, and... well, let's say it's not a chapter you really want to miss. Until then, don't forget to leave a review with your thoughts on this one and its battle.

A Night to Remember

Author's Note: First of all, happy new year to all my readers! Let's begin the year with a bang, because this is a chapter that have been on my mind for quite some time, it's been already written for almost a year, and I've been dying to see it published! I'm pretty sure you're all going to love it ;)

Chapter 46:

A Night to Remember

"Here we are!" Serena happily said, enjoying the magnificent view of the city in front of her. "Venesi City!"

As it was common in Tandor, a sign greeted them into the city:

Welcome to Venesi City

The Beautiful Watery City

Just like Alain had told them, they managed to get to the city just as the sun was starting to set. Sure, they wouldn't have much time to do anything, but at the very least they'd be able to sleep on the comfy bed of a Pokemon Center rather than on a tent in the open.

"Whoa, it's so beautiful!" Bonnie squealed. "It's even better than in the pictures!"

"Nene!" Dedenne agreed.

Venesi City was the largest city of East Tandor, and the second largest in all the region, second only to Bealbeach City. Though, despite their similar sizes, both cities couldn't be more different: while Bealbeach City was a modern tourist city of tall skyscrapers of metal and glass, everything about Venesi City screamed classically:

there were many multi-story houses made of solid brick, with their windows shaped in stylized arches, and roofs made of dark red tiles.

There were other, larger buildings made of bright white marble rather than bricks or stone, supported by massive columns with dome-shaped roofs of the same material.

However, what stood the most about the city were the many canals that crossed it. There were many gondolas driven by Floatzel slowly sailing through the canals, with couples of all ages, from young newlyweds to old marriages, and everything in between, comfortably sitting on the gondolas' loveseat.

Everybody, even somebody as unobservant as Ash, could notice the way Serena looked at the gondolas whenever they passed next to one, and made her best efforts to repress a squeal.

"Hey, look at those statues!" Bonnie said, pointing out to the roof of what appeared to be a cathedral, which was lined up with statues of a winged creature. "What Pokemon is that?"

The statue was that of a being with a feline body, but the head of a bird, as well as wings, and a long tail with an arrowhead-shaped tip, and a chestplate with an V-shaped symbol on it.

"Guess it's a Pokemon we haven't seen yet," Serena deduced. "But if they have statues of it here, I'm sure we'll be seeing the real deal soon."

"Maybe Rosalind uses one, given that-WHOA!" Ash gasped.

His friends mimicked the reaction, because all of sudden, one of the statues spread its wings and took off into the air.

"Did that statue just fly away!?" Bonnie shouted.

"Look, the other statues are also moving as well!" Clemont noticed, and indeed, one could see that the statues would shift in place or

move their heads.

"I have the feeling that's not the *statue* of a Pokemon," Serena said, pulling out her Pokedex.

"Gargryph, the Gargoyle Pokemon. Rock. They spend most of their time standing so still they are often mistaken for statues. They perch on the rooftops of Venesi City, guarding it from outside attackers."
The Pokedex explained.

"Guess we aren't the only ones who mistook them for actual statues, huh," Clemont pointed out.

"Well, guess if Nuclear Pokemon show up, those guys will help defend the city," Ash said, before adding: "Though hopefully such things won't come to pass."

"Way to tempt fate there, Ash," Bonnie deadpanned, rolling her eyes.

"Come on, let's find the Pokemon Center," Serena suggested.

...

The very next day, the group woke up completely rested and full of energy. After a good breakfast, they decided to head up to Venesi City's Pokemon Gym, given that Rosalind had told them to go there as soon as they reached the city so they could schedule a match.

"Alright, here we are," Serena said, who was guiding the group with a map of the city she had downloaded on her tablet.

"Wow. That's not your usual Pokemon Gym, isn't it?" Ash said, letting out a whistle.

"Piiiika," Pikachu agreed.

Because rather than a modern building, the Pokemon Gym of Venesi City was a massive, round-shaped building made of marble with a dome of the same material for a roof, with many Gargryph perched

on it. If it weren't for the official logo of the Pokemon League hanging above the entrance, no one would think that it was a Pokemon Gym.

"Eh, it looks good, but our Gym is better," Bonnie said.

"Here it says that this building used to be a theater dating from several centuries ago," Serena said, reading from her tablet. "Before Rosalind converted it into a Pokemon Gym."

"It looks like it's still a theater," Bonnie piped in, pointing out to the sides of the entrance. "Unless those posters advertising plays are just there for show."

Serena went on to check on the posters, and noticed that they were genuine, announcing the plays that could be seen during the week. "Huh, you're right..."

"Some Tandorian gym leaders have some weird tastes when it comes to Gyms, don't they?" Bonnie said. "Davern built one on an abandoned mine, Tiko on an ancient temple, and Rosalind on a classic theater."

"How a Gym looks on the outside doesn't matter that much. It's what you find on the inside that you should care about," Ash said, as he walked towards the double doors. "And inside is where we're going now!"

They were greeted by the sight of a beautiful hall whose floor was covered in marble tiles and from the walls hung all sorts of paintings, though most of them depicted thespians of past times. At the end of the hall was a counter where a black haired woman, which they assumed was a receptionist, worked.

"Hello there!" Ash warmly greeted upon walking to the counter. "My name's Ash Ketchum, and I'm here to challenge the Gym Leader!"

"Ketchum?" The receptionist repeated, as if the name struck a bell. She typed something in her computer, and nodded. "Ah, yes! Ms.

Rosalind anticipated your arrival so she made sure to have a spot for you. Though I'm afraid you'll have to wait for tomorrow, as she's currently in a contest in Rochfale Town."

"Aw, what a bummer," Ash deflated, as he slumped his head.

"Piiiiika..." Pikachu consoled his trainer, patting him on the head.

"Wait, Rochfale Town is pretty far away from here," Clemont pointed out. "How is Rosalind going to get here in time in just a day?"

"Ms. Rosalind has several Pokemon that can Teleport," the receptionist explained matter-o-factly. "That's how she's able to balance her job as a contest judge with her responsibilities here."

"Guess that makes sense," Serena agreed.

"The match will be tomorrow at seven in the afternoon, but make sure to come with some time to spare," the receptionist told Ash. "There are preparations that need to be made before the match can properly begin."

"Sure, I won't be late!" Ash assured the receptionist, before he and his friends walked out of the Gym and headed back to the Pokemon Center. He looked at Clemont and asked: "What do you think she meant by 'preparations'?"

Clemont merely shrugged. "No idea. Maybe they need to get the battleground ready, since they apparently use it as a stage..."

"Pity, I was hoping to see Ash winning another badge today..." Bonnie said, placing her arms behind her head.

After a twenty minute walk, the group finally arrived at the Pokemon Center. Once they were in the lobby, Ash wordlessly took Serena to an area in the lobby away from people.

"Um, Serena, can I ask you something?" Ash said. "It's about our date today."

Serena's face unsurprisingly brightened. "Oh, sure! I can't wait to see what you have prepared this time around."

"Well, part of it involves dinner at a fancy restaurant, and I don't think our clothes are going to cut it out," Ash told her.

Serena nodded. "Oh, I see. You know, I saw some boutiques on our way to the Gym, so I may go and check them. I still have the dress I used for our first date, but given the occasion, I think I'm going to get something new."

"In that case, I guess I should buy something myself as well. Or else I'm going to make you look bad, hehe," Ash chuckled.

"Come on Ash, you would never embarrass me. The clothes you wore for our first date would suffice," Serena reassured him.

"Though if you want to buy something new, that's your choice."

...

Just like Serena said, she spent the morning watching boutiques and clothing stores, hoping to find something elegant and beautiful to wear for their date that night. While Ash thought that the same clothes he used on their first date would work, perhaps he could add something to improve them, so he did something he almost never did on his own and went to buy clothes as well.

After that, the group reunited once again at the Pokemon Center, and after having some lunch, they decided to spend part of the afternoon training at the battleground just outside it.

"Greninja, Ice Beam!" Ash commanded.

"Counter with Energy ball, Coatlich!" Serena replied.

Greninja cupped his webbed hands, forming an orb of icy power between them, before thrusting them forward, releasing said energy in the form of a beam. Coatlich, meanwhile, opened her mouth and

formed a large sphere of emerald light, before launching it forward. Both attacks collided in the middle, resulting in an explosion of white and green, followed by a cloud of smoke of the same color.

"Now Greninja, Aerial Ace!" Ash said.

"Parry with Drill Peck, quickly!" Serena urged.

As an aura of light appeared around Coatlith muzzle and began to spin like a drill, the cloud of smoke was split in two as Greninja blitzed through it, his limbs glowing white. In an instant, the Ninja Pokemon reached hand to hand range and delivered a pair of powerful swipes at the Forest Lady Pokemon, whose Drill Peck didn't find its mark.

"Wrap him with your tail and use Giga Drain!" Serena ordered.

"Greninja, get out of there!" Ash warned.

However, this time it was Greninja who wasn't fast enough as Coatlith's lower body coiled around his own, leaving him trapped, as her claws and jaws began to glow with a green light before sinking all of them into Greninja's flesh. Small emerald orbs of energy flowed from Greninja into Coatlith.

"Free yourself with Night Slash!" Ash ordered.

"Gre, ninja!" Greninja cried as he summoned a sword of pure darkness on his right hand and delivered several blows at Coatlith's head, forcing the jungle dragon to release him. Now free, the Ninja Pokemon hopped back to a safe distance.

"Come on Ash, you don't have to hold back!" Serena called him out.

"This isn't like the time we started sparring, back when we just arrived at Tandor! The Grand Festival will gather the best coordinators this region has to offer, and I'm not going to be ready to face them if you still treat me with kid gloves!"

"Uhh... are you sure?" Ash asked, scratching his temple.

"Very sure! Come at me with everything you have!" Serena encouraged him.

"In that case..." Ash said, as he crossed his arms in front of his face.
"Come on Greninja! Let's do it, together!"

"Gre!"

Ash brought his arms forward, and a spiraling torrent engulfed Greninja. The transformation only took a few seconds, and once it was done, the water around him condensed into a water shuriken that was strapped to his back.

Serena smiled. "That's more like it. Get ready Coatlith! This is an opponent unlike any we have faced before!"

"Co, coat!" Coatlith cried.

"So, you feel ready to take on us at our very best? Very well then!" Ash said, throwing a punch forward. "Aerial Ace!"

"Counter with Energy Ball!" Serena replied.

"Well, not that I think that Serena is a bad trainer..." Bonnie began, as she watched with utmost attention the exchange of moves in front of her. "... but she shouldn't have asked Ash to go all out against her. He's going to crush her."

"Serena knows her chances of winning against an Ash not holding back are slim," Clemont, sitting next to her, pointed out. "But victory isn't what she's looking for right here."

"Uh? Then why does she ask Ash to do that?" Bonnie asked.

"Pika?" Pikachu, sitting next to Bonnie, asked as well, tilting his head at Clemont.

Clemont pushed his glasses up, as he studied the match in front of him. "Pressure. Serena wants to test how well she reacts against a much superior opponent. Not only does this allow her to grow stronger, but to test her ability to think on her feet."

"Ah, I see! Also, if she's used to fighting Ash at her best, then her opponents at the Grand festival will feel easier!" Bonnie added.

"That's an added bonus, yes," Clemont agreed. "Though underestimating her opponents wouldn't do Serena any good."

"Now Coatlith, wrap your tail around Greninja!" Serena ordered.

"Not this time! Greninja, Double Team!" Ash countered.

Before Coatlith could trap Greninja the same way she had done before, countless duplicates spawned around the battleground, and the one she grabbed vanished into thin air. Serena, though, didn't look all that worried.

"Not bad, but I have a way to find who's the real one!" Serena boldly declared. "Coatlith, Grass Whistle! Sing to your heart's content!"

Everybody could see the jungle dragon brighten at such an order, as she began to intone her usual cheerful melody. Ethereal musical notes colored green and yellow began to float around the battleground.

"G-Gre..." one of the Greninjas croaked, as his legs began to wobble.

"That one over there! Let's go with a Solar Beam, Coatlith!" Serena said.

The red flower bud at the end of Coatlith's tail bloomed into a flower, as it quickly began gathering solar energy to launch the attack.

"Greninja, quickly, get out of there!" Ash urged his Pokemon. However, Greninja moved way too slowly to dodge the impending

attack. "You have to snap yourself out of the drowsiness! Slap yourself awake if you have to!"

Greninja did so, giving himself a pair of slaps who seemed to wake him up. But by the time he had done so, the flower at the end of Coatlith's tail was glowing with a bright golden light.

"Too late! Fire away!" Serena declared.

"Coaaaaaaat-LITH!" Coatlith cried, releasing the stored solar energy in the form of a huge golden beam with green edges.

"Parry it with Night Slash!" Ash ordered.

Greninja summoned not one, but two swords of glowing purple energy, and crossed them in front of him in order to block the incoming beam.

"G-Greeeee... !" Greninja croaked as he struggled to keep the swords up while the sun-powered attack pushed him backwards. However, the Kalosian Pokemon managed to hold his ground, resisting the attack.

"Well done Greninja! Now, Water Shuriken!" Ash said, now more confidently.

"Greeeee... !" Greninja began, as he raised a webbed hand above his head.

A blue outline appeared around the Ninja Pokemon, before he was briefly engulfed by a spiraling torrent of water. Once the torrent disappeared, Greninja was holding a massive energy shuriken colored blazing orange.

"Pika!" Pikachu said, paying more attention to the match.

"Wait, I've seen that before! Is that...?" Bonnie began.

"Yes. Greninja used that variant of the Water Shuriken during the Kalos League finals!" Clemont began, sounding a little worried.

With a swift arm motion, Greninja threw the shuriken forward. All confidence disappeared from Serena's face as she saw the empowered attack barreling at lightning speed at her Pokemon.

"Coatlith, quickly, you have to dodge that!" she urged, but it was obvious that the Forest Lady Pokemon wouldn't be fast enough to do so.

However, before the attack could land, the orange shuriken began to shrink and crumble down, breaking down into orange sparkles.

"... huh?" Serena asked, still wondering what had just happened. "It didn't do anything..."

"Just like when he used it in the league finals..." Clemont said.

"ARGH!" Ash grunted, before falling to his knees.

"G-GRE!" Greninja croaked in pain, also falling to his knees, his transformation disappearing and reverting back to his base form.

"Pikapi!" Pikachu yelled.

"ASH!" Serena shouted, worried, as he rushed towards him. Clemont and Bonnie also got up and hurried to check on Ash as well. Meanwhile, Pikachu and Coatlith went to check on Greninja.

"Ash! Are you okay?" Clemont asked, helping his friend to get back to his feet.

"Y-Yes. That attack just took a lot out of me..." Ash said, standing on his own.

"Guess it was backlash caused by the bond between you and Greninja," Clemont surmised, as he looked at the Ninja Pokemon,

being helped back to his feet by Coatlich Unlike Ash, he didn't seem to be recovering as fast.

"That giant orange shuriken... it was like that other time," Bonnie pointed out. "It looked all big and scary, but it failed to do anything to Alain's Charizard..."

"I guess I never had the chance to ask because of what happened with Lysandre and Team Flare right after that, and then it probably slipped my mind," Serena began. "But what was that attack?"

"I... I don't know," Ash admitted. "The more we fought while bonded, I started to feel like there was this hidden well of power deep within Greninja. I tried to reach and harness it but... well, you saw the result, guess I kinda screwed up, hehe."

"I understand that you got curious, but it's better if you don't try that again," Clemont said, his eyes still focused on the Kalosian starter. "Putting such strain on Greninja for an attack without any real application is simply not worth it."

"No. I know that there's a way to use that move properly. Greninja also felt it. In the end, I'm sure it's no different than any other move; all you need to master it is training," Ash insisted.

"I'm not sure. It could be dangerous," Serena said, a little worried.

"I'm sorry, but... well, I don't think neither Greninja nor I can rest until we figure that thing out," Ash told her. However, he smiled and added: "But I promise we will be careful, okay? I don't plan to hurt neither myself nor Greninja."

This seemed to placate Serena, who smiled back a little. "Very well. I trust you," she said. Then she looked at Greninja. "Though, we should call it a day for today's training, and take Greninja inside so Nurse Joy can give him a look."

"Yeah, good idea," Ash agreed.

"Maybe you should try to rest too," Serena said. "Leave the date for another time-"

"No way!" Ash said, probably louder than he intended. "I mean, don't worry, I'm okay! I only need to lie down a little and I'll be back in shape in no time."

"Alright," Serena said, almost knowing there was no point in arguing. "Come on, let's go back inside."

...

Right after the training was over, Ash and Serena went out to buy clothes for their date. Ash was the first one to return, having taken very little time to buy anything, while Serena didn't return until a couple hours later, though thankfully she returned with enough time to spare to prepare for the date.

"Phew! I'm on time!" Serena said, as she entered the lobby of the Pokemon Center and looked at the clock on the wall.

"Well, good to see that you weren't going to stand Ash up," Bonnie piped.

Serena gasped at the apparent accusation. "I'd never do that!"

"Don't worry, I know," Ash reassured her. He then looked at the many bags full of clothes she was carrying. "Though, I see you didn't waste any time."

"Did you buy all of that for the date?" Clemont asked, a bit perplexed.

"Oh no! I bought a new dress pretty quickly, but then I decided to do some window shopping since I had the time, and window shopping became actual shopping and... hehe," she chuckled bashfully.

"Anyway, I better go up! I need to take a shower, do my hair and put on the dress."

"It's okay, just take your time!" Ash said as he watched Serena hurry upstairs to the room she shared with Bonnie. "You know, I think I better get dressed too."

After all, he preferred to wait for Serena rather than making her wait.

It didn't take long for Ash to get dressed. He was wearing the same navy short sleeved shirt and dark gray pants he had worn on his first date with Serena on the luxury cruise. But he was also wearing a jacket that matched his pants in color - East Tandor was a little colder than its western counterpart, so the extra protection was appreciated - and a red bowtie.

Looking at himself in the bathroom's mirror, Ash was satisfied with what he saw, but couldn't help but have some second thoughts over his choice of wardrobe. "So, how do I look, Pikachu? Fancy enough?"

"Pi, pikachu!" Pikachu happily said, giving him a thumbs up.

Even if Ash felt a little silly asking fashion advice to somebody who didn't wear any clothes, Pikachu's support made him feel a little more confident.

"Great! Then let's go down and wait for Serena," Ash stated.

Followed by his starter, Ash went down to the lobby. Clemont and Bonnie, sitting at one of the tables, quickly noticed his arrival.

"Hey, looking good, Ash!" Clemont complimented.

"Yeah! I was afraid you'd look like a dork, but those clothes make you look amazing!" Bonnie gushed.

"Uh... thanks?" Ash asked, tilting his head at the young girl.

"Are you going to take Pikachu with you this time?" Clemont asked.

Ash nodded, and looked at the yellow rodent. "If he wants, sure! Serena told me she doesn't mind if I bring him along. Plus, the restaurant Serena and I are going serves Pokemon too and-"

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu said, before scurrying towards Bonnie and sitting on her lap.

"Pikachu?" Ash asked. "Don't you want to come?"

"Chuuuu," Pikachu said, smiling and shaking his head.

"Awwww, look at that! Pikachu knows not to be a third wheel," Bonnie cooed as he began to pat Pikachu on the head.

Ash wanted to tell Pikachu that he wasn't that, but he had the feeling that he wasn't going to win this argument, so he decided to let the issue go. Bonnie has done a good job babysitting Pikachu while he and Serena were out.

Knowing that Serena would take longer than him to get ready, Ash took a seat on the same table the Lumiose siblings were sitting at, and engaged in conversation with the two of them. First he talked with Clemont, and the lemon blond told him about a project he was working on involving salvaged technology from Team Omega. After that, the conversation turned to Bonnie's excitement over the fact that there were only three months left until her tenth birthday, meaning that she could finally go on a Pokemon journey.

"So, what region are you going to explore first? Kalos?" Ash asked.

"Nah. I already traveled through Kalos once with you guys. I want to go somewhere new," Bonnie replied.

"But knowing Kalos already would be an advantage, given that it's a region you're familiar with," Clemont replied.

"And where's the fun in that? Kalos has no surprises left for me, and neither will Tandor once we're done with it. I want the excitement of

tackling a region completely blind!" Bonnie told them.

"Nenene!" Dedenne agreed, nodding.

"Okay, I'm ready!" Serena's voice said from the stairs, followed by the soft clattering of heels. "Sorry for making you wait so much!"

"Hey, it's no big deal. Now that-WHOA!" Ash said in shock.

"Oh my..." Clemont said, his glasses almost dropping.

"Whoa indeed," Bonnie agreed, her eyes fixed on Serena.

"So..." Serena began, a little bashfully. "How do I look?"

To say that Serena was stunning could have been an insulting understatement. The Kalosian girl was wearing a crimson, knee length strapless dress, a pink shawl over her shoulders, silver-colored high heeled shoes that left her toenails visible, and a necklace of blue pearls around her neck. She wore her long hair loose, with two long locks falling down the sides of her face, but it was wavy and glimmered in the light.

"Whoa..." Ash repeated, his cheeks turning a little red. "Y-You look incredible, Serena."

"Thank you! I was hoping to impress you," she giggled.

"You did more than impress me," Ash said, before looking down at his clothes. "Seeing you like this makes me feel underdressed..."

"Nonsense," Serena said, as she walked towards him and adjusted his bowtie a little. "You look really handsome tonight, Ash. You made an excellent choice of clothes."

"Hehe, thanks. I don't go to fancy places often, so I had no clue if I chose the right outfit," Ash said, a little relieved. He then held his arm for Serena. "Shall we go?"

"Sure," Serena said, as she wrapped her arm around his. As they walked, she turned towards the Lumiose siblings. "We will be late, so don't wait for us, okay?"

"Don't worry. And have fun on your date!" Clemont said, waving them goodbye.

"Pikapi!" Pikachu waved them goodbye as well.

"Look at them go. In no time, they will be married," Bonnie said, before letting out a dreamy sigh. "They grow up so fast..."

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"The city is incredible at this time of day, isn't it?" Serena asked.

The sun was slowly setting in the horizon, casting a soft golden glow over the watery city before opening the way for the night's mantle of darkness, making the urban scenery even more beautiful, meaning that twilight was a great time to take a walk through Venesi City.

Not that Ash was aware of this when he scheduled the hour at the restaurant, but he cheered internally for his good luck when Serena pointed this out.

"Yeah, indeed," Ash nodded.

"When I learned of Tandor and its many hallmarks, this is the city I wanted to visit more than any other," Serena said, as she took a good look at the buildings around them. "And so far, it's meeting all my expectations."

"I know. That's why I wanted to make sure that our date here would be one to remember," Ash said. The two of them crossed a bridge over a canal, just as a gondola carrying a middle aged couple sailed below them.

"Any date is worth remembering as long as it's with you, Ash," Serena sweetly said.

"Still, I feel like I should go beyond the bare minimum, hehe," Ash chuckled.

As they continued walking and chatting, they saw a large building rising above the rest, one that stood up not just because of its size, but also because of its modern design and bright colors contrasted wildly with the rest of the city's classic style and muted colors.

"Look Ash," Serena said, pointing at the building. "That's the Venesi City's Contest hall. Where the Grand Festival will take place in a little over a month's time."

"Boy, I can't wait for the Grand Festival to come. Seeing you and your Pokemon impress the audience and your opponents alike... and the best part, you walking out while carrying the Ribbon Cup," Ash added, before looking at Serena and asked: "Have you thought when are you going to put it?"

Serena chuckled lightly. "Ash, aren't you getting a little ahead of yourself? I may not win. Hell, I may not even get past the Appeal Round."

"With that pessimist attitude, you won't," Ash said in a lightly chastising tone. "The key to winning is to visualize yourself as the winner! Well, that, and training a lot, but we already have that part covered. Plus, you've never even lost an Appeal Round, and I don't think the Grand Festival will be any different in that regard."

"I guess you are right," Serena replied.

Recently, it had been a little harder for Serena to put a positive attitude and face her future challenges with a smile. Aside from the fact that she still couldn't take her last defeat against Sayaka from her mind, there was the whole issue with Oblivicorn. Serena knew that she didn't have any business in the Grand Festival if she was unable to uncover what had happened with the temperamental mare upon evolving that made her so upset at her trainer.

" *But I can't give up. I won't give up. I must keep trying,*" she reminded herself.

"Oh look, here we are," Ash said, as they stopped in front of a building with large windows that allowed them to see many people sitting at tables and having dinner.

Serena looked at the restaurant's name, and raised an eyebrow. She looked at Ash, scowling a little. "Ash... is this some kind of joke?"

"What? No!" Ash replied, taking a look at the name. "I mean... I saw the name and took it for a good omen. Though, I checked and all their reviews are pretty good."

It was hard to judge Serena for her reaction given the name of the restaurant in front of them:

RISTORANTE LA SERENISSIMA

"Apparently that's how Venesi City used to be called in ancient times, or something like that," Ash explained.

"Alright, let's go inside then," Serena said, before looking inside the place from the large window. " *At the very least, from here it looks pretty nice, joke name or not.*"

They both crossed the entrance, and found themselves in front of a mustached man in a tuxedo who was looking boredly at the computer screen in front of him. He quickly took notice of the two teens, though, and looked at them as if they shouldn't be here.

"Hey there!" Ash warmly greeted him.

The man's expression didn't change. "Benvenuti alla Serenissima. Have you made a reservation? Otherwise I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave."

"I made a reservation!" Ash happily replied. "Ash Ketchum."

The man turned to his computer and began to type something, probably Ash's name. He raised an eyebrow. "Oh yes, here it is. Please let me accompany you."

The maître led the young couple to the dining area, where other people were having dinner, though they stopped what they were doing to look at them as they were led to their table, probably not used to somebody as young as them choosing such a place to have dinner. Some people whispered to each other, but others, mostly women, giggled to themselves while gushing about how a cute couple Ash and Serena made.

Thankfully, their trek was short lived as they finally reached their table, next to a wall at the leftmost side of the dining area. There were a pair of wooden chairs with red velvet padding on the seat and the back and a single lit candle in the middle.

"Allow me!" Before Serena could take a seat, Ash pulled her chair back.

She giggled, appreciating his gentlemanly showcase. "Thank you," she said, before sitting and removing her shawl. Ash also took his jacket off.

"Here are the menus," the maître said, placing a pair of leatherbound menus in front of them. "Whenever you're ready to order, signal for a waiter to take your order."

"We will. Thank you, sire," Ash told the maître.

His job done, the mustachioed man returned to his post at the lobby of the restaurant. Once gone, Ash made a silent but exaggerated grimace, making Serena giggle for a second time. She hoped the rest of the service would be better than that guy.

Thankfully her hopes weren't dashed, as the waiter who came to take their orders was nothing short of polite and helpful.

As they waited for their food, they engaged in conversation.

"So Ash, I remember you telling me you saw a few Grand Festivals, right?" Serena asked.

"Yup! In Hoenn, Kanto, and Sinnoh," Ash replied. "Though they aren't that different from normal contests, you know? There's simply a bigger public and more competition."

"That's still a noticeable difference. The Master Class Showcase may have looked similar to the other Showcases, but trust me, it was anything but," Serena said, recalling the intensity of that competition. "So many performers, such a massive audience, the idea of facing Aria..."

"Don't put yourself down. You managed to make it to the finals of your very first Master Class Showcase, you'll do just as good here, if not better," Ash tried to reassure her.

"Thanks. But I know for a fact that Sayaka will be there, and I'm sure many other coordinators will be just as good as her, if not better," Serena replied, sounding a little worried.

"Whether you're gonna face Sayaka or someone better than her, you'll make it to the top anyway," Ash said with a warm smile.

One side of Serena wanted to rebuke his overly optimistic statement, while the other was telling her to just smile and accept the compliment. But she couldn't let the issue go.

"What about the other girls you traveled with? May and Dawn," Serena asked. "Did they ever win a Grand Festival?"

"Eh, no..." Ash said, deflating a little, as he averted her gaze. "May got to the Top 8 in her first Grand Festival, and managed to get to the semifinals in the next one. Dawn was the runner up of the Sinnoh Grand Festival," he said, but he was quick to add: "But don't let that discourage you! I know you're going to win this Grand Festival! You

were so close to winning that Master Class Showcase, and with how much you've improved, there's no way you won't win this time!"

The side of Serena that just wanted her to take in Ash's optimism and compliments won out this time.

"You always manage to keep such a bright look on everything, don't you Ash?" Serena asked gently. "Guess that's another reason that made me fall in love with you."

"Well, how else am I supposed to tackle the league, then? Maybe a positive attitude isn't all that's needed to win, but I can't see myself winning if I go thinking I'm going to lose," Ash began, smiling earnestly. "This is going to be my seventh league. Other people might have been discouraged at this point, but not me. Sure, I may lose, like I lost all my previous leagues, but so what? I can still try again. Visit a new region, catch new Pokemon... those are things I enjoy a lot, so even if in the end I don't return home with a trophy, I'll be taking home the new Pokemon I befriended, all the new friendships I made, and all the wonderful experiences I had."

Serena blinked a little as Ash's impassioned speech sunk in. Her facial expression relaxed, and finally answered: "Nothing we do is pointless, huh?"

"Exactly!" Ash replied. "So you should go into the Grand Festival thinking that not only you're going to win, but you're going to leave everybody dazzled by how amazing you and your Pokemon are. And if you don't win... Well, would you call your showcase run a waste of time just because you didn't beat Aria?"

"I see your point," Serena said smiling. Ash's words made her recall all the people she met, such as Shauna, Nini and even Miette, all what she learned, the sheer fun she had when she and her Pokemon were on stage... "And no, even if in the end I didn't win, I wouldn't trade my showcase run for anything in the world."

"See? That's what I mean!" Ash said. "I have met quite some people on my journeys that would think that not winning would make everything that came before pointless, but they couldn't be more wrong. Of course, that doesn't mean that I won't be aiming for the top."

Once again, Serena's thoughts turned to Sayaka. Recalling the last conversation she had with the ninja girl before their duel during the Legen Town Contest finals, Serena could tell that Sayaka would be among the kind of people Ash mentioned to her.

She couldn't end up being like Sayaka. And if that meant that she would never win a Grand Festival, then so be it. She wasn't going to give up who she was for fame and glory. She wasn't going to sacrifice her smile to reach her dreams.

"Your food," a waiter said, snapping Serena out of her thoughts, while placing a pair of dishes in front of them, then a bottle and a pair of glasses. "Thank you for your patience."

Ash had ordered a pizza margherita, while Serena had ordered a plate of spaghetti with tomato berry sauce and shredded cheese. To drink, they ordered mixed berry juice.

"At last! I was starting to worry!" Ash said, picking a slice of his pizza, which already came cut in slices, and took a big bite. "Ah, so good!"

Serena giggled and shook her head, before calmly eating her spaghetti. "Come on Ash, where is the hurry? Let's enjoy this nice dinner. Or were you *that* hungry?"

"I wasn't that hungry," Ash replied, while still chewing. He swallowed, and added: "Okay, I was that hungry, but that's not why I was worried about the time."

"Huh?"

"I planned something for after the dinner, and we'll have to be there at the scheduled hour," Ash told her. "Meaning that we can't stay here as long as we'd like."

"Oh," Serena replied. On one hand she didn't like the idea of having to rush a dinner she was enjoying so much, but on the other, she was clearly curious about what Ash had planned. "What are we going to do next, then?"

Ash smiled awkwardly, and averted her gaze. "Uhhh... I can't tell you, it's a surprise."

"A surprise," Serena repeated. That sounded like the kind of excuse somebody who was winging something would say. But then again, it wasn't like Ash had told her beforehand that they would be doing something after dinner, so he didn't have any need to lie.

"But it's a surprise you're going to love, promise!" Ash nervously added.

"Don't worry Ash, I believe you," Serena reassured her. "All our dates have been a joy, this one included. Whatever you have planned, I'm sure it will be great."

This seemed to placate Ash, who visibly relaxed and went back to his pizza. He then looked at his Pokegear. "Alright, we still have some time, so we won't have to swallow our food or anything."

"Good to hear that. I don't enjoy my food if I'm in a hurry," Serena said, bringing her fork wrapped in noodles to her mouth.

The two continued to eat their food as they fell into a comfortable silence. While they mostly focused on their food, from time to time they'd try to steal glances at each other while they thought the other wasn't looking, only to burst into giggles whenever they made eye contact.

"You know, I'm just remembering our first date at the cruise," Ash said, as he refilled his glass of berry juice. "And how we were so worried over not knowing what to talk about."

"Oh boy, don't remind me," Serena said, a little embarrassed, but her smile didn't disappear. "I remember that day as if it was yesterday. I was like 'I talk with Ash every day, we're just having dinner together, why it's suddenly so difficult!'"

"Haha, I was the same!" Ash laughed. "Thank goodness we managed to get past that!"

"After so many dates, if we didn't, then we had no business continuing this," Serena said, shaking her head. "So yes, I'm glad that we left it behind."

"Also, given that we've been dating for quite some time..." Ash began. He averted his gaze and pulled the neck of his shirt as if he was too warm. Was he actually nervous? "... is dating me at all like what you imagined?"

That question gave Serena pause. The raven haired boy wasn't somebody to worry over such a thing. Fortunately for him, the truth wouldn't hurt him.

"It was all that, and more," Serena replied as a warm smile adorned her face. She could feel Ash growing both more relaxed and a little happier upon hearing her words. "Why do you ask that? Were you afraid that you might not live up to the idea of you I had in my mind?"

"Eh... maybe a little?" Ash asked. "I mean... this dating thing is kind of new to me. I've been trying to do my best, but you can't see if you're doing good or bad like in a Pokemon battle."

"Let me assure you then, that you have nothing to worry about. Every single date we had has been a delight, and this one doesn't look to be any worse than those," Serena told him. "Though, why were you afraid that I might not like going on a date with you? It

would be one thing if we barely knew each other, but we've been traveling together for more than a year. I had more than enough time to get to know you, Ash."

"Yeah well, but we've never done this before. We travel together, we train, we do fun stuff alongside Clemont and Bonnie... but we have never done things like, well, this," Ash said, spreading his arms a little, waving at the restaurant around them to drive his point home.

"You don't have to worry, Ash. You're doing great, promise," Serena insisted. "If anything, I should be worried if you're enjoying this as much as I do."

Ash choked, as if Serena had just said the biggest of absurdities. "You? Why? How?" he almost blabbered. "Any boy should feel super lucky that you want to go on a date with them, Serena. And the fact that you chose me of all people-"

"I think you're overvaluing me a little, Ash," Serena said, her cheeks turning pink. "I'm not that special..."

"Are you kidding me? You had so many boys in Kalos pinning for you! Trevor, Tierno, that rocker guy with that Pikachu..." Ash began.

"Come on Ash, it's not that-wait a minute," Serena said, confusion spreading over her features as a realization dawned upon her. "You *knew* those guys liked me?"

"Not at first. But after I started dating you, well... I started remembering things from our journey through Kalos, and realized that some things weren't what I thought the first time around," Ash said, sounding a little embarrassed, not unlike somebody who takes far too long to understand the punchline of a joke. "Also... Miette knew, didn't she? That's why she made those insinuations about you and me and you got so nervous when she was around."

"Yeah... she told me it was her way of pushing me into making a move," Serena replied. "Though I'm still not sure if she was pining for

you or not... though, you haven't answered my question."

"Huh?"

"Are you enjoying going on dates with me?" the honey blonde repeated.

"Of course! I thought that was obvious," Ash said. "If that wasn't the case, I wouldn't have gone through so much effort to prepare today's date. Why would you ever think that?"

"Because it was me who started all of this, remember?" Serena reminded him. "I was the one who confessed my feelings for you on that ship. I was the one who *wanted* this. I was the one who couldn't just conform with us being friends, despite the fact that we had such a wonderful friendship-

"And we still have it," Ash interceded.

"-my point being, it was me who dragged you into all of this," Serena continued. "And you've been doing such great work making sure that I'm having a great time, that sometimes I wonder if you're neglecting yourself."

Ash tilted his head, and shot Serena a puzzled look. "Really? Do I really look like I'm having a bad time when I'm with you?"

"I don't mean that way, it's just that, well..." she began to look around. "Would a place like this be your first option if you wanted to have dinner?"

"Depends. If it's for a date like right now, absolutely. If you're worrying if I'd be happier at an All-You-Can-Eat buffet, I can always go to those another time," Ash replied.

Serena was about to say something, but shook her head and chuckled. "Oh boy, look at us. Worrying if the other is having a good time or not. Just what's wrong with us?"

"Yeah. Maybe we should stop worrying so much," Ash agreed. "If I didn't enjoy our dates, I would have said something by now. I feel like you would have done the same, right?"

"We should stop worrying so much'," Serena repeated, and chuckled. "Maybe we should make that into our motto. Not just for our dates, but for our life in general."

And stop worrying they did. Which allowed them to enjoy the rest of their dinner way more.

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Around forty five minutes later, Ash and Serena finished their dinner - they both shared a small chocolate cake as dessert - and went back outside. The night had completely covered the city in its mantle of shadows, with only the now lit streetlights and lights coming from open windows providing any illumination. The air was noticeably cooler than it was before, a jarring contrast with the warm temperature inside the restaurant, so they put on their jacket and shawl back, and felt lucky that they decided to bring it with them.

Still, that didn't make the city any less beautiful, or any less busy, given that plenty of people walked through its streets besides the duo, who walked hand in hand towards their next destination.

"So, how did you find the dinner?" Ash asked.

"One of the best I ever had the pleasure of having," Serena replied with a warm smile, which was matched by Ash's. "If you simply took me back to the Pokemon Center and told me that that was it, I'd consider this date a resounding success."

"Really? Heh, that's great! In that case, I can't wait for you to see what we are going to do next," Ash said, as he led Serena to turn a corner.

"So, where are we going now?" Serena asked, trying to find a clue by looking at the buildings they were passing by. She could discard the restaurants, because even if Ash's stomach was a bottomless pit, There was no way he would plan a second dinner after the first one.

"You'll see soon," Ash said, before stopping, and looking around. He looked a little disoriented, much to Serena's growing consternation.

"Ash, do you know where we are going, don't you?" the honey blonde asked.

"Eh, let me check the GPS..." Ash said, quickly opening the GPS app of the Pokegear. Upon seeing the map, his face lightened up, as if his worry disappeared. "Oh right, it's on the next block! Come on, I'm sure he's there already," he said, as he grabbed Serena by her wrist and led her to a street next to a canal.

"He? Ash, what are you planning?" Serena asked, as her mind went through the possibilities of any plan that involved a third person. While Serena would have been more than okay with Ash bringing Pikachu along, the idea of a third wheel wasn't exactly appealing.

"And here we are!" Ash said, upon reaching their destination. They were next to a canal, where a gondola with a Floatzel was waiting for them. "So, what do you think?"

"Ash, did you...?" Serena began, gasping, and covering her mouth with her hands. "Did you order a gondola ride?"

"How could I not? I heard you saying many times that you'd love to go on one, so I'd made sure to book one for the day we came here," he explained. "Do you like it?"

" *Like* it? Ash, I love it!" Serena almost squealed, beaming with joy. "I always wanted to go on a gondola ride when I first learned of them, but going on one on date with *you*... that goes even beyond my dreams!"

"I'm glad I got it right, then!" Ash said, as he hopped onto the gondola, and extended a hand to Serena. "Come on, all on board!"

Serena gladly took Ash's hand and stepped onto the ride. There was a loveseat where they would sit down, but it was so long that rather than sitting they were lying next to each other. Not that Serena minded that in the slightest.

"Flo, float!" The Floatzel cried to warn the two teens that they were ready to sail, as it picked up a long row and pushed the gondola forward.

The gondola ride lasted for a little over forty minutes. The two teens, lying next to each other on their comfortable loveseat, watched the city like very few people had the chance to. Naturally, they were far from the only couple who had ordered such a service, as they were passed by many other gondolas and their respective Floatzel navigators.

Aside from people, they also saw several Pokemon: from time to time, they'd see a Gargryph flying over the city, while a Tubjaw or Frynai would jump out of the canal before diving back in the water.

They barely traded a word as the ride lasted. Not that there was any need for it. Their mutual company was all the pair of teens needed right now.

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Once the gondola ride ended, so did their date. Both Ash and Serena had a great time and wished the date would go on forever, but it was almost one in the morning, and Ash had a gym battle the next day. Sure, it was in the afternoon, but it would do him no good if he didn't get enough rest for such an important match.

Thankfully, Ash was able to convince the Floatzel navigator to leave them on a street that wasn't too far from the Pokemon Center, so

they wouldn't have to walk too much. After a few minutes, they finally reached the Pokemon Center.

"Well, here we are," Ash said, stopping in front of the automatic doors. While most of the Center was dark, there was light coming from inside the lobby. "I hope you had a great time."

"Great' doesn't even begin to describe it, Ash," Serena said, wiping a strand of hair back. "It was one of the best nights ever. I'll treasure it for the rest of my life."

"Hehe, wow!" Ash said, blushing a little, and rubbing the back of his head while looking to the side. "While I'm glad that you enjoyed it so much, I don't know what I'm going to do to top it. The next date is going to be kind of a let down."

"Ash," Serena placed a hand on Ash's face, gently making him look at her. "No date with you will ever be a letdown. I thought that we already made that clear."

Ash didn't say anything, and chuckled bashfully. Then, he finally looked at Serena. As if time froze, the two of them remained there, not moving a muscle, staring into each other's eyes.

"Serena...?" Ash asked, his voice slurring a little. "It's just me or... or... were you always this beautiful?"

"Aw, thank you Ash."

That's what Serena would have wanted to say but no words came out of her mouth. She instead put her other hand on the other side of Ash's face. Steeling her breath, she leaned forward, feeling as if her body was going on autopilot, but she didn't fight it. She began closing her eyes and pursed her lips, without even noticing that Ash was mimicking her.

Both Ash and Serena's faces came close to each other...

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... before their lips met in the middle, forming a kiss.

The kiss only lasted a few seconds, but for Serena it felt way longer. Yet, when it ended and their faces parted, she felt like it hadn't lasted

long enough.

" *OH MY GOODNESS, MY FIRST KISS! AND IT WAS WITH ASH! THIS MUST BE A DREAM!*" Serena thought. " *Wait a minute... I kissed Ash! Oh my goodness, did I go too quick? Did I screw up? How is Ash going to take it?*

Blushing madly, the two teens stared into each other's eyes, not knowing what to do or what to say. Until the two of them suddenly broke into a fit of silly giggles.

"Sooooooo..." Ash began, sheepishly rubbing the back of his neck. "Did you... did you like it? T-The kiss?"

"Yes," Serena said, as she unconsciously touched her lips with the tip of her fingers. So Ash was also on board with the kiss, the thought alone brought her untold amount of relief. "Yes, I liked it. I liked it a lot," she replied, her cheeks turning redder and redder by the second. And while Serena looked calm on the outside, she was a storm of emotions on the inside.

"G-Good!" Ash said a little too loudly. "Because, um, because I kinda acted without thinking and then I was afraid that I crossed a line or something..."

"No, no! It was okay, I promise," Serena was quick to reassure. "If I didn't want you to kiss me I would have said something."

Ash sighed in relief, but didn't say anything, causing their short exchange to fall into a lull, albeit this one was way more uncomfortable than when they were at the restaurant or the gondola.

Serena couldn't take it anymore, and decided to let out of her chest the question that had been burning inside her. Given that Ash *had just kissed her*, she was sure of the answer, but she wanted to hear it from Ash's mouth. "So, Ash... does this mean that you figured out how you feel towards me?"

"I think?" Ash replied, his voice quivering a little. A knot formed in Serena's stomach. There's no way, no freaking way, that Ash couldn't have this figured out by now. Still, she decided to let him continue speaking. "The dates we had these past weeks... they were loads of fun. And the more we had, the more I enjoyed them, and the sooner I wanted to have another one. And I, I really like being with you, Serena. I'm not sure if that's love or not but, um... what I'm trying to say is, what we have been doing these weeks, not only I don't want it to stop, but I want even more. And when we kissed... my heart beat so fast and there was as if fire spread all over my body... it was what I feel when I'm competing in a Pokemon League, but somehow even better..."

As Ash talked about his feelings and what Serena meant for him, the knot in her stomach began to unravel, replaced by a warm feeling as her heart rate increased. Yeah, Ash wasn't somebody who had a way with words, but he was trying, and she could tell that he did love her.

"So Serena... would you like to be my girlfriend?" Ash asked.

Finally. He asked. Serena had lost count how many times she had imagined, had dreamed, had fantasized with Ash asking her that. It took a region and a half, but he finally said it. Her patience had finally born fruit.

Serena smiled widely. "Yes, Ash. I'd love to be your girlfriend."

And then the honey blonde placed her arms around Ash's neck and gently pulled him into a second kiss. Ash happily welcomed and returned the kiss, as his arms wrapped around her waist. The kiss was even longer, and somehow even better than the first.

After the kiss broke, Serena felt she could go for a third. And a fourth. And a fifth. And maybe... no wait, it was too soon for that. But alas, it had to end there.

"We better go inside. It's kind of late, and you have a big day tomorrow," Serena told him.

"Heh, I doubt any day will be bigger than this one," Ash said, his face still a little dreamy. Then, his face lit up as if he realized something. "Oh wait! Before we go, let's take a picture together! To commemorate our first kiss and becoming a couple!"

"Sure, that's a good idea," Serena agreed.

The recently formed couple bunched up, while Ash prepared to take a picture of them with his Pokégear. However, he was having a hard time framing the image so the two of them could fit. It was then that Ash noticed something about Serena that he hadn't realized before.

"Uh, Serena... since when did you become so tall?" Ash asked, a little surprised.

"Oh, the heels! I forgot I was wearing them!" Serena said, quickly taking off her high heeled sandals. "Try again."

"Alright," Ash said. This time, though, the two of them could fit inside the picture. But Ash didn't take it. "Hey, how are you *still* taller than me...?"

"Really?" Serena asked. "I never realized that..." she then stood in front of Ash, and used her palm to measure them. "Hey, it's true! I'm taller than you! Though, I'm sure you won't have a problem dating a taller girl, will you?"

"Of course I won't." Ash stated. "Is that, well, I never noticed that. Most of the girls I traveled with were shorter than me."

"Don't worry my little boyfriend," Serena giggled, patting Ash on the head teasingly. "Your big girlfriend is here to protect you and make sure no one steps on you by accident."

"Har har, you're so funny," Ash said, rolling his eyes a little, but his smile didn't disappear. "Also, we haven't taken the picture yet."

"Oh right!" Serena said, as she quickly went to bunch up with Ash again. "Come on, let's do it!"

This time, they managed to get the picture. A couple seconds later Serena's Pokegear pinged, and saw that Ash had sent her the picture they just had taken without having to ask him.

"There, now we have something to remember this day," Ash stated.

"I don't think I'll ever forget about this day, Ash," Serena replied.

No more words were exchanged for the rest of the night, and the newly formed couple silently entered the empty lobby of the Pokemon Center and went to their respective rooms.

It would take them more than an hour for the excitement of the day to fade from their bodies, allowing them to fall asleep.

Author's Note: At last! After much buildup and waiting, Ash and Serena not only finally become a couple, but they also shared their first kiss! The plan was always for them to hook up for good in Venesi City, since I felt the city provided the perfect atmosphere for a romantic upgrade. I hope the wait was worth it, and you liked this chapter almost as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Regarding the name of the restaurant Ash and Serena had dinner at, yeah, "La Serenissima" was the name of the city-state of Venice (what today is Venice City, and the inspiration of Venesi City in Pokemon Uranium) from 697 to 1797, so I felt it was a very fitting name for such a place that would preclude to Ash and Serena hooking up for good. It was Viroro, my betareader, who told me about this when we were talking about possible names for the restaurant.

On top of the date and the relationship upgrade, this chapter also opens up a couple more plots, such as Serena getting ready for the Grand Festival (though that won't happen until Ash gets his 7th badge) as well as Greninja using again that beefed up Water Shuriken that managed to do jack shit against Alain's Charizard. But who knows, maybe there's something more to that attack ;)

Thanks a lot to Firem78910, Fox McCloud, dmmr, MegaSalamence64, Guest #1, and hirowriter for reviewing the previous chapter, as well as special thanks to my betareader Viroro-kun, who helped me with this chapter in ways few other people would have.

Also, check the Ao3 version if you want to see a picture of the scene of Ash and Serena kissing in front of the Pokemon Center's doors.

Next chapter, Ash challenges Rosalind, and will find out why is she considered among the three strongest Ta ndorian Gym Leaders. In the meantime, be sure to leave a review with your thoughts on this chapter!

Curtain Up!

Chapter 47:

Curtain up!

Venesi City

"You guys KISSED!?"

Clemont's surprised yell echoed through the whole cafeteria. Even if the group got some stares, there weren't that many people there just yet, and they quickly just went back to their food.

"Louder, big brother. I don't think they heard you back in Kalos," Bonnie deadpanned, shooting her brother a reprobatory stare. Then she turned towards Ash and Serena, and her expression morphed into one of pure joy. "But I agree with him! It's soooooooo great that you guys are finally a couple!" she squealed.

"Yeah, we're really happy for you," Clemont added after regaining his composure.

"Thank you," Serena said.

Suddenly, Bonnie's joy was replaced by worry, as if she realized something she hadn't thought of yet. "Hey, wait a minute, now that you guys are a couple... you'd prefer to travel on your own, don't you?"

"What? Why?" Ash asked. "No, we plan to continue traveling with you guys. What has Serena and I becoming a couple have to do with that?"

"Some couples prefer to be alone in order to have more privacy," Serena gently explained to her boyfriend. "But we don't want things to change between us. It wouldn't be the same without you guys."

Bonnie sighed in relief, her previous happiness resurfacing now that she had been assured this new development wouldn't mean the end of her group as she had known it.

"Still, if you need or want some privacy for whatever reason, don't be afraid to ask," Clemont offered. "And Bonnie and I will get out of the way."

"I don't think that will be necessary, Clemont, But thanks for your consideration," Serena said, smiling at the inventor.

"Still, it doesn't hurt to offer," he said. Then, he asked: "So. What's the plan for today? Remember that you have the gym battle against Rosalind this afternoon."

"Heh, as if I would ever forget that," Ash proudly replied. "But given that I have the time, I think some light training would do us some good. Both as a warm up, and to make sure all my Pokemon are in top shape and ready to face her."

"Make sure you don't go overboard, or else your Pokemon will be too exhausted to fight," Serena reminded him.

"Pika," Pikachu nodded in agreement.

"I know, I know," Ash replied.

"Also, remember that even if the match is scheduled at seven, they told you to come at least an hour early," Clemont interjected.

"Don't worry guys, I don't plan to fumble this battle. Especially since it's against one of Tandor's top three Gym Leaders!" Ash said, his voice full of excitement, as he quickly finished his breakfast. "We can train in the morning so my Pokemon will be rested by the early afternoon."

...

A few minutes later, after everybody finished their breakfasts, they moved to the battleground adjacent to the Center in order to help Ash do some last minute training. The first one to face Ash was Clemont, followed by Serena. Once it was noon, they decided to call it a day so as not to exhaust Ash's Pokemon. Ash was rather satisfied with their performance, and was sure that Rosalind wouldn't even know what hit her.

Once lunchtime was over, they decided to relax a bit in the Pokemon Center before going to the Gym. Then, Serena realized something, something that she and Ash would need to do sooner rather than later now that they finally hooked up.

"Oh my goodness! Ash, we haven't told our moms that we're boyfriend and girlfriend now!" Serena said in realization.

That realization seemed to jolt the raven haired teen as well. "Oh, right, we better call them to give them the news!" Ash agreed. "Especially since my mom helped me out a lot when I was having trouble putting my thoughts in order after your confession."

"Which one do we call first?" Serena asked.

"We can call yours first," Ash offered.

"Alright," Serena said. As Ash and the Lumiose siblings huddled towards her, she dialed her mom's number on her Pokegear. After a few seconds. Grace's face appeared on the screen.

"Oh, hello, Serena! It's so great to see you again!" Grace said, smiling upon seeing her daughter. Then, she looked at Ash, Clemont and Bonnie. "And hello to you three as well!"

"Hi there, Mrs. Gabena," Ash greeted her.

"It's good to see you again," Clemont said.

"Hiya!" Bonnie waved.

"It's been a while since the last time you called. The last time was just to make me know that you were okay when that power plant blew up."

Serena rolled her eyes a little. "It hasn't been that long after that, mom."

Oh, if only Grace knew half the messes they got themselves into.

"Anyway, aside from that, how's the trip through Tandor going?" Grace asked.

"It's going great, mom! I have all five ribbons now!" Serena told her.

"Really? That's great! I knew you could do it," Grace said, beaming with pride and joy. "I'm sure that this time you'll walk out the winner."

"Let's hope you're right," Serena said, before swallowing uncomfortably, mentally preparing herself to give her mother their most recent development. The idea of talking about such a topic made her a little nervous and uneasy. "Mom, the reason I'm calling you it's because, well..." she took a deep breath. "Remember that Ash and I have been dating for the past few weeks...?"

"Y-Yes...?" Grace asked, as she leaned closer to the screen.

"W-Well, yesternight Ash asked me to be his girlfriend, and I said yes! We're a couple now!" she almost squealed.

"He did! Oh my, that's so great! Though, I knew that Ash wouldn't be able to resist your charm, Serena, and that he would fall for you sooner or later" Grace said, before sighing in relief. "Relieved as well. You looked so nervous, I was afraid you were going to tell me I was going to be a grandma."

"M-MOM!" Serena yelled, turned into a yet undiscovered shade of red, with Ash himself choking and turning red as well. "Ash and I are *nowhere* near the point of doing THAT!"

"Don't worry Mrs. G, I'll make sure these two behave!" Bonnie said, teasingly patting Ash and Serena on the shoulder, before Serena pushed her away.

"A-Anyway! I mostly called to tell you that, mom," Serena said, the red on her face persisting.

"And I'm so happy for you, sweetie," Grace said, smiling warmly. She then turned towards Ash, and her expression hardened just a tad, but enough to put Ash on guard. "Ash?"

"Yes, Mrs. Gabena?" Ash asked, as a bead of sweat ran down his temple.

"You're dating my daughter now, you can call me Grace," Grace said, smiling at him. Though it didn't appear to be a reassuring smile.

"Uh, yeah, Grace," Ash replied.

"I don't think I need to tell you to take good care of my daughter now," Grace said, her tone turning a little sterner.

"O-Of course! I already promised you that Serena would always be safe with me!" Ash replied, stammering a little.

"And I better not hear that you've been fooling around," Grace continued.

"M-Mom!" Serena shouted, turning even redder.

"Fooling around...?" Ash repeated in confusion.

"Or else you will learn how terrifying a Rhyhorn can be," Grace added, her voice carrying a dangerous edge. "We Rhyhorn Racers know things about them most trainers ignore. Things that-"

"MOM!" Serena yelled.

"Okay, okay, I'm just messing with you!" Grace said, her tone suddenly turning cheerful and relaxed, while holding her hands defensively. "I hope the rest of your journey goes well. And make sure to call me before the Grand Festival."

"I will. Goodbye, mom," Serena said, finishing her call. She leaned backwards and let out a tired sigh. "Ugh, that could have gone so much better," she groaned. The honey blonde then looked at Ash apologetically. "Sorry about that. My mom can be so difficult sometimes..."

"Eh, it's okay. She worries about you, just that," Ash reassured her. "Plus, she was happy that we hooked up, so I think it went pretty well!"

Serena sighed, but chuckled a little. "Sometimes I wish I had your aplomb."

"Alright, now time to call my mom," Ash said, as he dialed his house's number in his pokegear. After a couple tones, Delia appeared on the screen.

"Oh, hi Ash! It's so good to see you!" Delia said, looking unsurprisingly cheerful upon seeing her son. "So, how is your trip going?"

"It's going great mom. I already have five badges, and today I'll fight for my sixth one," Ash enthusiastically said.

"That's great, honey!" Delia said, beaming with pride. "Though, while I'm really happy to hear how good you're doing, I have the feeling that you aren't calling me just to tell me about that, am I right?"

"Hehe, yeah," Ash chuckled, scratching his cheek with his free hand. Then, he used said free hand to pull Serena towards him so Delia could see her. The honey blonde smiled bashfully at the brown haired woman. "You see... Serena and I are boyfriend and girlfriend now!"

Delia gasped, and covered her mouth with both hands. "Oh my goodness! Ash, that's wonderful!"

"I should thank you for this. If it wasn't for that advice you gave me on the cruise... knowing me, I would have screwed it up," Ash sheepishly said, rubbing the back of her head.

"Come on Ash, don't say that," Serena gently said.

"It's okay, son, I'm glad I was able to help you. And even more glad that you decided to pursue her! Serena is a girl you simply couldn't let go!" Delia said, making Serena's face redder.

"I know right? Serena is *such* a catch!" Bonnie interjected, grinning widely at the screen.

"Hehe, yeah, Serena is amaz-mom? Are you crying?" Ash asked upon seeing her mother's eyes welling with tears.

"Sorry, it's just..." Delia said, as she wiped the tears from her eyes with a handkerchief. "You have a girlfriend now! You're growing up so fast! I still remember the time you left Pallet Town with Pikachu for the first time... and now look at you! My little boy is turning into a man... but it's only natural, you weren't going to be ten forever."

"Yeah, they even kissed!" Bonnie said once again.

"Bonnie! That's not for you to reveal!" Clemont admonished her, as he pulled her away from the screen. "Leave Ash and Serena some privacy, this is a very important moment for them."

"You kissed!?" Delia echoed, her surprise returning in full force. "Oh, of course. Like I said I shouldn't be surprised that you do such things now," Delia sighed. "Though, take good care of Serena, you hear me? Now that you have a girlfriend, you can't think in Pokemon battles alone, and if you don't give her the attention she deserves, she'll leave you. If you lose her, I doubt you'll find a girl like her."

"Don't worry mom, I don't plan to," Ash replied. "Like I told Serena's mom, I'll be the perfect boyfriend to her!"

Delia nodded. "That's what I wanted to hear. Oh, and Serena?"

"Y-Yes, Mrs. Ketchum?" She asked.

"Oh please, call me Delia, dear," Delia said, smiling warmly at her. "Take good care of my son too. Though, you've been traveling with him for quite some time now, so you should know that he can be a handful."

"H-Hey..." Ash weakly protested.

"Piiika," Pikachu said, patting his trainer's head.

Serena giggled. "Don't worry Mrs. Ket-I mean, Delia. Ash is in good hands."

"Anyway, like I said before, my next Gym Battle will be in a couple hours, so wish me luck!" Ash said.

"Of course, sweetheart. I know you'll do great," Delia said.

"Goodbye, mom."

"Until later then, Ash."

The call finished, and just like Serena had done, Ash leaned back on his seat and let out a sigh of exhaustion.

"Come on Ash, it's already over," Serena said, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder. "The next time we talk to either of them, it will be much easier."

"At least my mom didn't threaten you," Ash said. "Or joke-threaten."

"She didn't ask if she was going to be a grandma either," Serena added in gratitude.

...

The afternoon arrived, and thus the group headed towards Rosalind's Pokemon Gym/Theater. As they walked through the streets of the watery city, the group engaged in conversation.

"... though he hasn't mastered it just yet," Ash said. "It's a pity, I think Steel Wing would have been such a good move for Dunseraph to have for this match."

"It can't be helped. Though, hopefully he'll have it down for the next Gym Battle," Clemont said, shrugging.

"Your Pokemon aren't the only ones trying to learn something new. Coatlith has been hard trying to master Dragon Rage," Serena chimed in. "Seeing Alain's Voltasu use that move inspired her."

"By the way, Ash, now that Raptorch has evolved, you can use Mega Evolution with him besides Metalyx, right?" Bonnie asked.

"Huh? Oh right! Vaeryn also gave us an Archillesite. I kinda forgot about that," Ash sheepishly said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Still, Raptorch evolved just recently, so I don't feel confident enough with using Mega Evolution on him without testing it first."

"Well said," Serena said, nodding in approval. So far, there weren't any problems with Metalyx's Mega Evolution, and she believed there wouldn't be any either with Archilles, but better safe than sorry. If Ash needed an additional boost, he had both Greninja and Metalyx.

"It's a pity. I wanted to see what Mega Archilles was like," Bonnie said.

"Now that you mention it, I still couldn't manage to see how Electruxo handles Mega Evolution either," Clemont said in realization. He looked at Ash. "I think we should both correct such oversight as soon as we're done here, Ash."

"Of course! A Mega Evolution match between the two of us sounds great!" Ash said, beaming with excitement.

Serena was about to say something, until she noticed something unusual. She looked around, and asked: "Hey guys, did you realize that pretty much everybody is going in the same direction as us?"

Her three friends began to look around, and like her noticed that every other pedestrian was indeed walking in the same direction.

"It seems like they're going to the Gym too," Clemont said, scratching his temple. "They said the Gym is also a theater. Maybe there's a play today?"

"They also said there are no plays when there are challengers," Serena pointed out, as worry began to creep up her back. Did they get the day and hour wrong or something?

Her worry only increased once the Pokemon Gym/Theater was in sight, with a large queue of people leading into it. This was an image common when going to a Contest Hall, but the first time it happened in a Pokemon Gym.

"Oh come on, don't tell me we have to wait in line to enter..." Bonnie whined.

"Nene..." Dedenne said as well.

"I don't think so. Come on, let's go inside. Once I tell them that I'm here to challenge the Gym Leader, they'll clear any misunderstandings,"

They did as Ash suggested, and walked through the double doors of the building, ignoring the line outside. Once in the lobby, they saw the same receptionist who had greeted them the first time. Upon seeing Ash, her face perked up.

"Oh, hello Mr. Ketchum!" the receptionist happily greeted Ash. The fact that they were waiting for him lifted the worry weighting on Serena's shoulders. "You came even earlier than we told you too. Good."

"So, is Rosalind here? I can't wait to fight her!" Ash stated.

"Yes, Rosalind is here, though she's overseeing the preparations for the battle. And you must prepare as well," the receptionist said, and before Ash or any of his friends could ask what she was talking about, she pressed a button. "Mr. Zeppeli? The challenger and his friends are here!"

Almost immediately, a side door opened as a man walked through it. The man was tall, had blue eyes and messy blond hair, and was wearing a headband. He was followed by a smaller woman, also blonde, who was smiling joyfully.

"The challenger is here already? Great. Follow me, andiamo!" the man said, as he turned around and walked away. "Suzie-Q, can you take care of the girl? And lead the other two to their seats."

"Certo, Mr. Zeppeli!" the bubbly girl, Suzie-Q, said as she grabbed both Clemont and Serena through their wrists and dragged them to another door. "Come on dearies~!"

"Are you deaf, ragazzo? Come with me!" Mr. Zeppeli impatiently insisted upon seeing that Ash didn't move.

"Follow you where? To the battleground?" Ash asked.

"Not yet. To the dressing room," Mr. Zeppeli said, and upon seeing Ash's confused expression, he added: "I mean, you don't plan to face Rosalind wearing *that*, don't you?"

Ash looked at his clothes, half confused and half offended. These were the clothes Serena had chosen and bought for him at the start of their journey, and he wasn't going to let anybody talk them down.

"What's wrong with my clothes? I wore them when I faced every other Gym Leader so far."

"Maybe, but this isn't like the other Gyms, as you're about to see. Now come on!" Mr. Zeppeli insisted.

"Okay, okay, I'm coming! Sheesh..." Ash grumbled as he followed the blond man. "Pikachu, you better go with Clemont."

The rodent nodded, and followed the inventor.

And indeed, like the man had said, he led Ash to a large dressing room, where plenty of make-up artists, hairdressers and other stylists were working. Mr. Zeppeli had Ash sit on one of the empty seats, and a pair of women began to work on him.

"Don't worry honey, this will take no time!" one of the women said, as he placed a black sheet around his neck, covering his body.

"When we're done with you, you'll be so dazzling everybody will have to wear sunglasses to look at you!" the other woman giggled.

Ash cringed and wondered what kind of Gym he had stumbled into.

...

After leaving Serena in what appeared to be a dressing room - their questions of why they needed to "prepare" Serena for the battle went unanswered - Clemont and Bonnie were led to a large theater by Suzie-Q.

"And these are your seats!" the bubbly blonde said, motioning to the central seats of the front row. "The challenger's companions get the best seats, free of charge!"

"Uh, thanks," Clemont said. "But I think there has been a mistake. We're here to cheer for our friend in his battle against Rosalind, not to see a theater play."

"Oh, there hasn't been any mistake, I can assure you that," the smiling woman said. "Now just relax and wait for the spectacle to begin," she then looked at her wristwatch, and pursed her lips. "Though you may have to wait some time, given that the match won't begin until another hour."

"Okay..." Clemont said, as he and Bonnie took their seats, the latter placing both Pikachu and Dedenne on her lap.

And indeed, the wait was pretty long. It was just an hour but it felt longer. The inventor was somebody who hated wasting time, so he wished he could just pull a half-done project from his backpack and work on it, but alas he wasn't in a place suited to do so.

After the first half an hour passed, people began to slowly enter and fill the seats. As people began to trickle in, a cacophony of murmurs and chatter began to form and increase, until it was completely full, at which point it looked more like they were in a Contest hall rather than a Gym.

And as soon as it became seven o'clock, the lights went out and the curtains went up, revealing a seemingly pitch black scenario.

"Oh, it's beginning!" Bonnie began, hopping on her seat.

A low, melodious piano music began to play. The scenario was illuminated a little, showing what appeared to be some sort of medieval village with a tall castle in the background. There were two dark figures at the opposite ends of it. Somebody spoke with a voice Clemont recognized as Rosalind's.

"Long time ago, there was a prosperous kingdom, ruled by a young but very wise princess," Rosalind's voice began, sounding as if she was narrating a fairytale. "And while its people were peaceful and didn't know the ways of war, they weren't afraid of threats, for there was a brave knight ready to defend them from whoever dared to disturb their peace!"

A spotlight shone over one of the figures, the one standing on the leftmost side of the scenario, revealing to be a raven haired teen dressed as a medieval knight and looking extremely confused.

Clemont leaned forward, and adjusted his glasses to check he was seeing right. "Is that... *Ash!*? "

"Wow, look at that! Ash rocks the knight look so hard!" Bonnie gushed.

"Pikapi!" Pikachu agreed.

...

Ash didn't know what was going on, nor what was he supposed to do. After Mr. Zeppeli left him in the dressing room, the pair of stylists combed his hair, applied some makeup, and had him wear a knight costume - Despite the armor looking like genuine metal, it was actually plastic, something Ash appreciated. Ash protested all the time, insisting that there has to be an error, but everybody was adamant that there wasn't any.

Once the hour of the match approached, Mr. Zeppeli returned.

"Alright ragazzo, it's your time to shine. The match is a four versus four, single format, with only the challenger allowed to make substitutions," the blonde man explained, before placing a tiny earpiece on Ash's ear. "So you can hear the referee. You won't see any referee, but trust us, there will be one. Only you and Rosalind will be able to hear him, otherwise it would break the immersion."

"Break the immersion...?" Ash dumbly repeated.

"You'll understand once the match begins," Mr. Zeppeli said.

And thus Ash was led to the battleground, which was completely pitch dark at first, though he could see the shape of another person at the other side of it. Then, he was startled to see a curtain rising to

his right, revealing a huge audience as if this was a contest. Then, the person at the other side of the battleground started talking, and Ash immediately recognized the voice as that of Rosalind. When the Gym Leader mentioned a knight, he was suddenly illuminated by a spotlight from above, making him wince by the sudden increase of light.

"But alas, the knight was about to meet his greatest challenge, for there was a villainess who could only feel hatred and misery, and the fact that such a happy kingdom existed filled her with the burning anger of a thousand Magcargo," as Rosalind said this, a spotlight illuminated her, allowing everybody, Ash included, to see her. She was wearing her usual half black, half white clothes, the only difference was that her face was covered by a theater mask, also half black and half white. "And thus, the villainess gathered her minions, and prepared to attack the little kingdom! She sent her first minion, a trickster imp, to open the attack! Duplicat, to the scene!"

That moment Ash realized that his match against Rosalind had just begun.

Rosalind tossed a pokeball forward, releasing a curious looking Pokemon that Ash had never seen before: it was a small white cat with two stumpy legs and no arms, black ears, four yellow eyes, and a black tail in the shape of the Omega symbol.

"Dupli, du!" the Pokemon meowed.

"What Pokemon is that...?" Ash asked, as he pulled out his Pokedex from within his costume. Thankfully they allowed him to keep it on him.

" *Duplicat, the Copycat Pokemon. Normal. This Pokémon has the ability to create an identical copy of itself or its opponent. These copies only last a few minutes before fading away.*" The Pokedex explained.

"I see," Ash said, putting the pokedex away and grabbing a pokeball from his belt. "Alright then, Frosthra, I choose you!"

The capture device opened, releasing the Frost Moth Pokemon, who buzzed happily.

"And the Knight sent the first of his companions, a mystic from the frozen north!" Rosalind grandiosely narrated. "But will it be enough to stop the devious villainess?"

~Challenger Ash (Frosthra, ?,?,?) VS Gym Leader Rosalind (Duplicat, ?, ?, ?)~

"We'll be taking the first move! Frosthra, Signal Beam!" Ash ordered.

"Evade it with Double Team, Duplicat!" Rosalind ordered.

The Frost Moth Pokemon fired a multicolored energy beam at the small white and black feline, who flickered for a second before the entire battleground was full of them. The Signal Beam only managed to dispel a single copy.

"Remove all the copies with Blizzard! Make it as wide as possible!" Ash ordered.

"Fros! Froooooo... !" Frosthra nodded, and started beating his wings as fast as possible, producing a powerful gust of frigid wind with snow and ice chunks. As the battleground was quickly covered in ice, the Duplicat copies started to disappear.

"The northern mystic was powerful, but his magic alone couldn't match the imp's trickery," Rosalind narrated. "Confuse Ray!"

As Frosthra launched the Blizzard, the real Duplicat among the few remaining copies locked eyes with him. Duplicat's four eyes began to glow with an eerie yellow light.

"F-Fro...?" Frosthra slurred, stopping the Blizzard.

"Frosthra, hold on! Don't let that Confuse Ray mess with you!" Ash encouraged his Pokemon, though deep down he knew it was in vain, since Confuse Ray's effectiveness was absolute. "Frosthra, Blizzard again! It won't be able to dodge it a second time!"

"Thra...?" Frosthra slurred again, before firing a Signal Beam at multiple spots on the battleground, none of them coming close to hit the target.

"Unfortunately for the brave Knight, the imp was too much for his champion to deal with. Not only was the ice mystic confused out of his mind, it soon wouldn't be able to move yet," Rosalind dramatically said. "Glare!"

"Protect, quickly!" Ash urged.

Duplicat locked eyes with Frosthra for a second time, its four eyes flashing with all colors of the rainbow. Fortunately, this time around Frosthra was able to follow Ash's orders, and threw over him a protective energy shield that blocked the paralyzing move from taking effect.

"Double Team, Confuse Ray, Glare... what's with that Pokemon? It doesn't have offensive moves?" Ash wondered. "Blizzard again!"

"The imp didn't need offensive moves, for it had the ability to use the enemy's power against him!" Rosalind said with a hand flourish. "Mirror Coat!"

"What! No, Frosthra, stop!" Ash shouted.

However, in his confusion, rather than Blizzard, Frosthra used String Shot instead. The sticky substance hit Duplicat in the face, leaving it blinded and causing the Mirror Coat to fail.

"Yes!" Ash pumped his fist at his good luck. Luck that didn't end, as at that moment Frosthra shook his head, his eyes now clear and

focused, no longer under the effect of confusion. "Frosthra, Signal Beam, come on!"

"Fro, frosthra!" the Frost Moth Pokemon buzzed, firing yet another multicolored beam from his antennae. The blinded Duplicat didn't have a chance to dodge it, and the attack hit him in full.

"Du, dupli!" Duplicat meowed in pain, before using its tail to wipe the sticky thread from its face.

"Alas, it seemed that the Knight finally managed to work around the imp's trickery. However, the imp still had one ace in the hole!" Rosalind said, her voice growing bolder. "Duplicat, Transform!"

"Duuuu... !" Duplicat wailed as its body glowed with a white light. The copycat Pokemon then grew and took on a different shape, almost as if it was evolving. When Duplicat stopped glowing, it was now a perfect replica of Frosthra.

"Not bad, but a copy will never surpass the original!" Ash stated. "Frosthra, Blizzard!"

"Shield yourself with Protect!" Rosalind ordered.

Frosthra once again sent a freezing storm towards its now identical enemy, but Duplicat protected itself from the attack by encasing itself inside the familiar green energy bubble.

"Now bind him with String Shot and follow up with Signal Beam!" Rosalind quickly ordered.

From the white cloud of powdery ice formed by the failed Blizzard a single sticky thread shot through, wrapping itself around Frosthra's body, and pulling him towards said cloud, just as it was rapidly dispersed by a Signal Beam. The Bug-type move struck, breaking the sticky cord and blasting Frosthra backwards.

"Froooo... !" he cried.

"Frosthra, are you okay?" Ash asked.

The ice insect shook his head, looked at Ash, and nodded. "Fro, frosthra!"

"The ice mystic was brave and powerful, but he wasn't used to fight against somebody who wielded his very same magic," Rosalind narrated. Ash could tell she was grinning under that mask. "The imp's trickery was more than a match to his power."

" So, her strategy was to use defensive moves to see what attacks Frosthra could use, then use Transformation and turn Frosthra's power against him," Ash's lips curved into the faintests of smirks. *"Still, your tactic has a flaw you have overlooked."*

"Duplicat, use Blizzard!" Rosalind ordered.

"Counter with a Blizzard of your own, Frosthra! Show that copycat who is the best of the two!" Ash told his Pokemon.

"Frosthra fro!" Frosthra agreed.

Both Pokemon flapped their crystal-like wings, blowing a powerful cold wind with snow and sharp chunks of ice. The attacks met in the middle and locked into a stalemate, no move being able to overpower the other.

"Frosthra, drop the Blizzard and switch to Protect!" Ash quickly ordered. "And get close to Duplicat!"

"Frost!" Frosthra buzzed in agreement, as he stopped beating his wings while conjuring a green energy shield around himself.

The Blizzard blown by Duplicat advanced unimpeded towards Frosthra, encased inside the green shield, who plowed through the Copycat Pokemon's attack.

"He won't be able to use Protect a second time! Use Signal Beam!" Rosalind ordered.

"Deflect it with Shadow Claw!" Ash ordered.

"... what!?" Rosalind exclaimed.

Ash's smirk widened.

As Duplicat's Blizzard disappeared, the Copycat Pokemon fired a multicolored energy beam from its antennae. However, Frosthra's front claws were covered in a ghostly aura, and with a mighty swipe, it blocked the Bug-type attack while still getting closer.

"You didn't take into account that Frosthra might have more moves than those he initially used. Since Duplicat was a Normal-type, I had no reason to use a Ghost-type move like Shadow Claw. But Transformation also changes the user's type, so I guess I can use it now! Go for another Shadow Claw, Frosthra!"

Frosthra reached close combat distance in no time and delivered a pair of powerful swipes at the copycat's face with his ghost-empowered claws, pushing it backwards with each strike.

"Duplicat, Blizzard!" Rosalind ordered.

Wasting no time, Duplicat blew yet another freezing storm at Frosthra. The close distance between them meant that Ash had no time to issue a defending order, and the Frost Moth Pokemon was blasted backwards by the powerful Ice-type move.

"Frosthra!" Ash cried.

Despite Frosthra not being vulnerable to Ice-type moves, Blizzard's sheer power must have hurt a lot. He'd better make sure Rosalind wouldn't catch him like that again.

"Duplicat, go with another Signal Beam!" Rosalind ordered.

"Protect, and get close to Duplicat!" Ash ordered.

As Frosthra once again shielded himself with a green energy bubble while flying forward, Duplicat fired yet another multicolored beam that crashed uselessly against the shield.

"Throw a Protect before he attacks again!" Rosalind warned her Pokemon.

"And now, Blizzard!" Ash said.

"The brave knight wanted to copy the copycat's tactics, but alas it's impossible to copy a copycat's skill to copy!" Rosalind narrated.

"Keep going Frosthra! Put as much power into that Blizzard as possible!" Ash ordered.

People in the audience began to murmur, wondering if the challenger planned to overpower a Protect with sheer brute force, something that was patently impossible under normal circumstances. However, past battles had taught Ash that even if some protective moves can't be bypassed, they can be turned against their users.

As the Blizzard washed over copycat, ice and frost began to build around the green energy shield, slowly encasing the Copycat Pokemon inside a prison of ice.

Rosalind's body language betrayed that she almost broke character.

"Not bad, but not enough to stop my devious minion!" Rosalind cackled. "Break out with Shadow Claw!"

Duplicat smashed its icy prison from the inside with darkness-coated claws, making a crack that increased in size with each hit, until the Copycat Pokemon broke through it, sending chunks and bits of ice everywhere.

"Now quick, String Shot!" Ash shouted.

As the doppelganger was finally able to get out of the ice prison, it was blinded by a sticky thread quickly wrapping around its head.

"No! Get rid of that with Shadow Claw!" Rosalind ordered, her voice losing her cool.

And that was the opening Ash was waiting for.

"Now Frosthra, another Blizzard!" Ash said, throwing a fist forward.

"No, wait, use Protect-"

Too late. While Duplicat was busy removing the sticky strings from its head, Frosthra beat his wings and sent another ice storm towards his enemy. This time, the attack hit it full, blowing the Copycat Pokemon backwards among the chunks of ice and snow, before falling to the ground with a loud noise.

"And finish with Shadow Claw!" Ash said.

As the badly beaten Duplicat tried to get back into the air, Frosthra zipped to its position, claws coated in ghostly energy, and delivered a pair of powerful swipes that sent the doppelganger back to the ground.

This time, not only didn't Duplicat get back to its feet, but it returned to its original form. It didn't move.

"Duplicat is unable to battle, the winner is Frosthra!" Ash heard a man say through his earpiece.

"Alas, in the end, the northern mystic was able to best the villainess' trickster imp," Rosalind conceded, as she returned her defeated Duplicat. "But in the end, the villainess had won, for the true purpose of her shapeshifting imp was to distract the hero while the perfidious evildoer kidnapped the Kingdom's princess and took her to her lair!"

That moment, the background changed, from a bucolic medieval village with a tall white castle during daylight, to a dark mountain with an ominous, scary castle on top during the twilight.

But what surprised Ash the most was a cage descending from the roof with a person on it. A person she knew very well.

"Serena!?" Ash asked in shock. "What... what are you doing there!?"

Serena was inside the cage, hanging above them. She was wearing a pink princess outfit that glittered a lot, complete with a conical princess hat.

"Rosalind said it was part of the show," Serena said, sounding a little bashful. "Eh, don't worry about me, just focus on winning this."

"Uh, okay..." Ash said, a little unsure. He didn't know how to feel about the idea of continuing his battle with Serena inside a hanging cage, but decided that it would be better to listen to her.

"Fro... fro..."

Ash's thoughts went from Serena to Frosthra. The Frost moth Pokemon was wheezing, and was having difficulties just staying afloat. Even if in the end he had won, the battle had taken its toll on him.

"You did a great job, Frosthra. Take a good rest," Ash said, returning his Pokemon.

"Of course, the brave Knight wasn't going to let the devious villainess get away, so he chased her all the way to her lair, a sinister castle on the top of a cliff in a land perpetually covered in darkness!" she narrated, as a pokeball appeared on her hand. "But alas, one obstacle stopped him from entering the lair of evil, as the castle was protected by a mighty ogre! Winotinger, to the scene!"

The pokeball opened, releasing Rosalind's second pick, another Pokemon Ash had never seen before: it was a bipedal pink rabbit with yellow feet and underbelly, as tall as a human being. It had a ruff of white hair around its neck, small antlers above its eyes, small wings on its back, and a long tail ending on a puff of white hair.

It was Pokedex time.

"Winotinger, the Chimerical Pokemon, and Jackdeary's evolution. Fighting/Fairy. It combines illusion and trickery with physical strength. Because it can only be seen by drunk people, it was considered an imaginary Pokémon until very recently," the Pokedex explained.

Weird. Ash was sober and he could see it perfectly. Oh well, better not mull on unimportant details. Ash was quick to select his own second pick.

"Dunseraph, I choose you!"

The capture device opened, releasing the angelic dragon.

"Dun, dunse!" Dunseraph cried upon appearing, flapping his wings a couple times, blowing wind in Winotinger's direction.

"Alas, the brave Knight is also a dragon tamer!" Rosalind commented. "But a dragon might have not been the wisest choice to battle the guardian of my fortress!"

"We'll see about that!" Ash replied.

"Very well, oh brave knight. I shall test your dragon's mettle then!" Rosalind said with a flourish. "Winotinger, let's begin with Dazzling Gleam!"

"Counter with Ancient Power!" Ash shouted.

"Wi, wi, wino!" Winotinger cried, as its body glowed with a pinkish-white light, before releasing a barrage of light missiles of the same color.

Meanwhile, Dunseraph summoned a ring of spinning golden rocks around him, and launched them towards the incoming attack. The boulders clashed against the light bolts, producing explosions of gold and pink, with neither attack being able to overpower the other.

"Follow up with Sky Fall, Dunseraph!" Ash shouted.

"Dodge it with Bounce!" Rosalind replied.

Compressed air began to swirl around Dunseraph's body, before folding his wings and diving towards the Chimerical Pokemon like a missile. Unfortunately for the angelic dragon, the rabbit leaped into the air just before the God Snake Pokemon could smash into it.

"And Aura Sphere from the air!" Rosalind said.

As it soared above the battleground/scenario, Winotinger quickly brought its paws together, forming a sphere of bluish-white energy, and launched it at Dunseraph. The Fighting-type move homed onto the large dragon, smashing against his back and exploding immediately after.

"Duuuuuun... !" Dunseraph cried, as he quickly turned around, just to see Winotinger land on its feet.

"As the brave Knight's dragon found out, the fortress guardian wasn't somebody to be trifled with," Rosalind narrated.

"Dunseraph!" Ash cried as well. Despite the type resistance, that Aura Sphere had done no small amount of damage. "Come on Dunseraph, you can do this! Go with Poison Jab!"

"Dun, seraph!" the God Snake Pokemon cried, as he dived towards Winotinger tail-first, the drill at the end of his tail being coated into a bright purple aura.

"Bounce once again, Winotinger!" Rosalind commanded.

And once again, Winotinger leaped into the air just in time to avoid Dunseraph's venomous attack, which hit nothing but empty space.

"And Aura Sphere one more time!" Rosalind happily ordered.

"Oh no, not again! Dunseraph, dodge it with Dig!" Ash commanded.

As Winotinger brought its paws together to form another sphere of destructive energy, Dunseraph dived towards the ground as his body spun as fast as it could, burrowing underground. When Winotinger finally launched the attack, the angelic dragon was safe underground and the Aura Sphere only hit the ground.

And as soon as Winotinger's feet touched the ground, so did Dunseraph burst from below the surface, smashing his head against the surprised rabbit, sending it flying upwards.

"Wiiiiiii... !" Winotinger cried.

"Well done, Dunseraph! Follow up with another Poison Jab! It can't dodge while it's in the air!" Ash commanded.

"Dun, dunse!" Dunseraph cried in agreement, as he thrust his drill tail at Winotinger, a venomous aura quickly cloaking it.

"Parry it with Thunder Punch!" Rosalind heatedly ordered.

Winotinger was able to right itself mid air, and clenching its paw into a fist as it was covered in yellow electricity, the electrified punch parried the poison drill strike. Dunseraph kept thrusting his tail towards the rabbit, but the Chimerical Pokemon was able to block each strike with fast and precise hits, until it landed on solid ground once again.

"And Aura Sphere one more time, my fortress guardian!" Rosalind said.

" *She probably expects me to use Dig again to dodge it, so better pick something else,*" Ash thought as Winotinger formed the energy sphere. "Block that attack with Dragon Pulse!"

Dunseraph opened his mouth and exhaled a blue and purple dragon-shaped energy blast. Both attacks clashed against each other, resulting in an explosion that made the battleground shake.

"Now, get close and use Play Rough!" Rosalind ordered.

Showcasing admirable speed, Winotinger quickly bridged the gap between it and Dunseraph. Jumping towards the dragon, the rabbit raised both paws, which were glowing with a light pink aura. Winotinger then delivered a flurry of strikes, slaps and swipes at Dunseraph, who could only yelp in pain as each strike pushed him backwards.

"Poison Jab!" Ash ordered again.

"Jump backwards with Bounce!" Rosalind ordered. "And go for another Aura Sphere while you're in the air!"

Dunseraph tried his Poison-type move again, but it failed once more as Winotinger leaped backwards as he formed yet another sphere of energy. The God Snake Pokemon snarled as he glared at the bright pink jackalope.

"Dunseraph, Sky Fall! He won't be able to dodge that mid air!" Ash ordered. "Plough through the Aura Sphere!"

"Dun, dunser!" Dunseraph cried in affirmation.

"The brave Knight and his dragon, while steadfast, resorted to increasingly desperate measures to take down the fortress' guardian," Rosalind narrated in a mocking manner.

Glaring at Winotinger, the God Snake Pokemon flew at his foe as he covered his body in a cloak of swirling pressurized air. Just Ash had ordered, Dunseraph pushed through the Aura Sphere, the cloak of pressurized air softening the blow, before slamming headfirst into the winged rabbit's chest, triggering an air explosion and sending Rosalind's Pokemon flying backwards.

"Poison Jab, Dunseraph! This time it won't be able to dodge!" Ash insisted.

"Sera!" Dunseraph cried, as he flew towards the fallen Winotinger as the drill end of his tail was coated in a cloak of venom.

"Dodge it with Bounce!" Rosalind urged.

Winotinger quickly jumped back to its feet, but winced the moment it attempted to jump a second time, its body shaking in place.

"Yes! Paralyzed!" Ash heard Serena cry from above. For a second he had forgotten she was above them in that small cage.

That moment, Dunseraph's poisoned drill tail slammed into Winotinger's gut. The Chimerical Pokemon cried in pain as it took the super effective attack, thrusting it even further backwards, next to its trainer.

This time, though, it didn't get up.

"Winotinger is unable to battle! Dunseraph is the winner!" Ash heard the referee through his earpiece. Okay, so far, so good, he had taken down half of Rosalind's team without losing a single Pokemon himself. Even if the monochrome-haired woman proved to be a tough nut to crack, if he could keep the momentum, everything would be fine.

"Yes! Way to go, Ash!" Serena cheered from above. "You're almost there!"

As Rosalind recalled her defeated Pokemon, the background changed again. It no longer showed the dark castle atop a cliff during sunset, but the inside of the castle instead, which was as creepy on the inside as it was on the outside, especially the amount of skeletons lying around.

"And thus, the brave Knight defeated the guardian of the gate, and entered the fortress in search of his beloved princess," Rosalind continued narrating, as she slowly reached for another pokeball. "Unfortunately for our hero, another foe would obstruct his quest: a

malignant conjurer proficient in the dark arts! To the scene, Miasmedic!"

The capture device opened up, revealing the tall, lanky, purple and beak-masked Plague Doctor Pokemon. Unlike Rosalind's previous two picks, Ash had seen this Pokemon countless times, usually flanking a Nurse Joy on a Pokemon Center, and sometimes using a healing ability like Heal Pulse or Aromatherapy to heal an ailing Pokemon. But he had never seen one used for combat, so he wasn't sure what he could expect.

"Dunseraph, can you continue?" Ash asked.

"Dun, dunse!" Dunseraph cried in agreement.

"Alright, I trust you then!" Ash said. "It's another Fairy-type, but I know that won't be a problem for you!"

"Emboldened by his previous victory, the brave Knight underestimated the foe in front of him, trusting that his mighty dragon may be able to fell it as well," Rosalind said with a flourish. "But alas, the masked spellcaster had powers that went beyond mere brute strength!"

Rosalind called for Miasmedic's first move, and Ash knew that the battle had turned way more complicated.

Author's Note: Yeah, this was starting to get too long for my tastes, so I split this gym battle in two. I was only planning for the 8th gym battle to be a two-parter, but this chapter had so much going on before the actual battle actually began (Ash and Serena telling Clemont and Bonnie about their relationship upgrade, the call to their respective moms, the setup for the gym battle...) that by that point the chapter was +5K words long. And given that this was going to be a 4v4... yeah.

If you have played the game, you noticed that I omitted the part about Rosalind being the very first theatre actress, because I found it unbelievably silly. While it's true that women were banned from theaters in ages past (female roles were played by male actors in drag) said restrictions were lifted as soon as the 17th century. And it's doubly stupid in the Pokemon universe, which is shown to be egalitarian to an almost utopian level when it comes to things like race or gender.

I also changed the gimmick of the first time you fight Rosalind being a decoy because it would be hard to implement out of the games, so instead I made it so her battle is like a play, complete with an audience. Hope such change makes the battle feel unique.

Thanks a lot to Lipeghoul, dmmr, Fox McCloud, MegaSalamence64, MarcusDarkus87, hirowriter and BrightNova169 for reviewing the previous chapter, and special thanks to my beta Viroro-kun, whose edits and suggestions made this chapter so much better.

Well, Ash has defeated half of Rosalind's team without losing a single Pokemon himself, but he shouldn't get too confident, since Rosalind has yet to show her true power. And while part 2 comes, don't forget to leave a review!

Life's a Masquerade

Chapter 48:

Life's a Masquerade

"Emboldened by his previous victory, the brave Knight underestimated the foe in front of him, trusting that his mighty dragon may be able to fell it as well," Rosalind said with a flourish. "But alas, the masked spellcaster had powers that went beyond mere brute strength! Miasmedic, Trick Room!"

"Mi, mi, miaaas!" Miasmedic intoned, raising its thin, long arms, as its body glowed light blue. The entire battleground was encased inside a checkered cage of light of the same color. Dunseraph looked around, confused.

"That thing again," Ash grumbled, remembering how annoying it was dealing with such an effect when he had to battle Valerie for his sixth Kalos badge. Still, he had no choice but to soldier on.

"Those who see Trick Room for the first time are surprised or scared, but you seem to be more annoyed than anything, oh brave Knight," Rosalind commented. "It seems like you're familiar with this kind of magic?"

"I am! And the last time somebody tried to use Trick Room against me I managed to overcome it, and this time won't be any different!" Ash boasted, also remembering how he still managed to defeat Valerie in the end. "Alright Dunseraph, begin with Ancient Power!"

"Duuuuun... !" Dunseraph cried as he summoned a spinning circle of glowing rocks. Ash didn't appreciate any drop in speed, probably because since Dunseraph fell somewhere in the middle between fast and slow Pokemon, the Trick Room didn't have much of an effect on him.

However, Miasmedic must have been a very slow Pokemon, because the moment Dunseraph launched the Rock-type attack, the Plague Doctor Pokemon dodged the barrage of golden rocks so fast, it became a purple blur. Both trainer and Pokemon's jaws fell upon seeing the sheer speed Miasmedic moved now.

"Your dragon is stunned by the power of my conjurer, brave Knight," Rosalind cackled. "And that's only a drop of the power of its magic! Miasmedic, Poison Jab!"

Miasmedic vanished from the spot it was standing and reappeared next to the bewildered Dunseraph, a claw coated in a venomous aura already risen, before striking Dunseraph with it in the face. The dragon cried in pain as Ancient Power was canceled.

"Finish him off with Moonblast!" Rosalind shouted.

"Dunseraph, dodge it with Dig!"

As Dunseraph dived to the ground, Miasmedic brought its hands together and formed a large orb of pinkish-white light, and once again it pretty much vanished before reappearing next to Dunseraph, slamming the energy sphere into his face, resulting in a explosion of pink and white that sent the God Snake Pokemon crashing backwards with a loud thud.

"Dunseraph!" Ash cried.

But the angelic dragon didn't move.

"Dunseraph is unable to battle! The winner is Miasmedic!" Ash heard the referee say through his earpiece, and his shoulders sagged in disappointment. Ash sighed, and returned his defeated dragon. "Thank you, Dunseraph. You did your best," he reassured, before picking another pokeball. "Splendifowl, I choose you!"

The pokeball opened upon hitting the floor, releasing Ash's first Tandorian Pokemon.

"Sple, splendi!" Splendifowl happily whistled upon being called to action. He then looked at the checkered walls of light encasing the whole battleground in confusion. "Fowl?"

"Listen Splendifowl, those walls of light around us are part of a move called Trick Room. It's going to make you move much slower than usual, so keep that in mind, okay?" Ash told the bird.

"Splendi!" Splendifowl nodded, before fixing his sight on Miasmedic.

"And the brave Knight's next champion is an elegant bird of prey," Rosalind narrated. "But alas, will the bird triumph where the dragon failed, or will he also fall before the conjurer's power? We'll see it right now; Miasmedic, Poison Jab!"

"Mia, mias!" The Plague Doctor Pokemon leaned forward, and moved towards Splendifowl so fast, it almost produced a sonic boom. The Paradise Bird Pokemon barely had time to react to the attack before a trio of venomous claws stabbed into his chest, sending it careening backwards.

"Splendifowl!" Ash cried.

"Very good, my perfidious wizard! Another Poison Jab!" Rosalind said with a flourish.

"Let's slow him down with Gust!" Ash commanded.

Splendifowl started to beat his wings as fast as he could, blowing a powerful wind in Miasmedic's direction. While still fast, the Plague Doctor Pokemon was slowed down enough to be visible now.

"Fly upwards!" Ash commanded.

Splendifowl elevated slowly into the air, but with enough speed to avoid the second Poison Jab.

"Just as I thought. Unlike Spritzee, Miasmedic can't float. We'll be safe as long as we keep our distance," Ash said.

"Don't be so sure, oh brave Knight," Rosalind said in a taunting manner. "Miasmedic, Moonblast!"

"Stop it with Air Cutter!" Ash said.

Both Pokemon prepared their respective ranged attacks, but the Trick Room allowed Miasmedic to fire much faster. The swirling orb of pink and white barreled towards Splendifowl while the bird was still gathering power to generate the blades of compressed air, finding its mark and producing an explosion of the same color.

"Spleeeeeeeeeee!" Splendifowl squawked in pain as he pummeled towards the ground.

"Splendifowl!" Ash cried.

"He won't be able to dodge this time! Poison Jab once more, my sorcerer of shadows!" Rosalind said with a theatrical arm motion.

"Dodge it with Quick Attack!" Ash said without thinking. It was only after those words left his lips when he realized that what was otherwise a valid strategy wouldn't work here. "No, wait-!"

"Sple!" Splendifowl whistled as he righted himself mid air, and prepared to use Quick Attack.

"Mias!" Miasmedic said, jabbing his poison-coated claws into Splendifowl... but hitting thin air instead. "... medic?"

There was a collective gasp as Splendifowl rocketed upwards and away from Miasmedic's grasp, leaving a trail of fading white light behind. Even if Rosalind's face was hidden by a mask, Ash knew she was as surprised as he was over this new development.

"So speed-based moves like Quick Attack can overcome Trick Room..." Ash said, a wide smirk forming on his face as this new information sunk in. "... the course of this match is about to change."

"Don't think this changes anything!" Rosalind replied, undeterred. She threw a hand forward. "Moonblast!"

Miasmedic formed yet another orb of swirly white and pink energy, and tossed it at Splendifowl, the sphere barreling towards the songbird. Ash, however, wasn't worried.

"Dodge it with Quick Attack!" Ash said. "And keep going forward! Miasmedic won't be fast enough to dodge it!"

"Sple!" Splendifowl whistled in agreement, as he folded his wings and dived towards Miasmedic as he gracefully avoided the energy blast, the speed boost granted by the attack unhindered by the Trick Room.

"We don't need to dodge! Because my evil sorcerer is also a master of close combat!" Rosalind boasted. "Gyro Ball!"

"Miasmeeeeeeeee... !" Miasmedic cried, as it began to spin in place so fast, it turned into a blurry purple tornado.

Splendifowl slammed against Miasmedic, but the force of the Gyro Ball proved to be greater than that of the Quick Attack, and the Paradise Bird Pokemon was smacked backwards.

"Of course. An attack like Gyro Ball, that becomes more powerful the slower the Pokemon, is a great fit for somebody as slow as Miasmedic," Ash thought. Then, he noticed that the Trick Room around them was starting to flicker. *"Trick Room doesn't last forever. Still, Rosalind can call for another one the moment this one disappears. Better prepare for that."*

"Miasmedic, use Moonblast again!" Rosalind commanded. The Trick Room flickered again. It seemed that Rosalind hadn't noticed. "Rapid fire! He can't dodge forever!"

"Dodge with Quick Attack!" Ash replied.

Miasmedic began to fire a barrage of smaller orbs of pink and white energy at Splendifowl, who used Quick Attack to fly around the battleground, dodging them as best as he could. At least until one of the Fairy-type projectiles hit him in the back.

"Foowooowl!" he whistled in pain.

Then, the Trick Room vanished completely.

"Now, Splendifowl! Air Cutter!" Ash shouted.

Feeling how his natural speed returned to him, Splendifowl beat his wings twice, sending a pair of blades of compressed air at Miasmedic, who was unable to dodge them now that it no longer had the Trick Room to boost its speed. The blades of air found their mark, pushing the Plague Doctor Pokemon backwards.

"Yes! Let's see how you do now that the Trick Room is over!" Ash taunted.

"Just as easy as raising another one! Come on my fearsome conjurer, Trick Room!" Rosalind ordered.

"We're not gonna let you! Stop it with Sing!" Ash said.

Miasmedic raised its claws as his whole body began to glow with a light blue aura, just as Splendifowl intoned a beautiful, dynamic melody. Ethereal musical notes began to appear around Miasmedic, interrupting its move as it began to succumb to drowsiness.

"Use Aromatherapy to resist the sleepiness!" Rosalind commanded.

"Mirror Shot, Splendifowl!" Ash said.

Miasmedic's body began to glow with a green light as clouds of pink mist appeared around it, eliminating the effects of Sing and remaining awake. Unfortunately, while Miasmedic was busy doing that, Splendifowl had fired a metallic green energy beam at Miasmedic, blasting the Poison and Fairy-type backwards.

"Miasmedic!" Rosalind cried.

"Finish it off with Quick Attack!" Ash said, already savoring the win.

Splendifowl shot like a rocket, leaving a trail of fading white light behind, before slamming into Miasmedic, who was still trying to get up. The Plague Doctor Pokemon was launched even further backwards, falling painfully on its back. Rosalind's Pokemon had its arms sprawled and its eyes were all swirly.

"Miasmedic is unable to battle, the winner is Splendifowl!" Ash heard the referee announce through his earpiece.

"Yes! Good job Ash! And you too, Splendifowl!" Serena congratulated them.

"Sple, splendifowl!" the songbird thanked her.

"One more Pokemon, and that badge will be yours!" Serena said.

"I know. Still, I better be careful. I'm sure that Rosalind has saved the best for last," Ash said, as he fixed his stare on the masked Gym Leader, who recalled her defeated Miasmedic.

"You have no idea how right you are, oh brave Knight," Rosalind began, as she grabbed the pokeball containing her last Pokemon. "For the villainess had one last champion that she could call to battle. One so powerful and terrifying, its mere sight caused even the boldest of heroes to whimper in fear: a wraith from the deepest, darkest pits of hell! To the scene!"

Rosalind tossed the pokeball forward, and Ash and Splendifowl braced for what would no doubt be Rosalind's strongest fighter.

"Huh?"

So both of them were understandably confused when another Winotinger came out of the capture device.

Sure, her first Winotinger proved to be a tough nut to crack, but in the end Ash had managed to beat it, even with Dunseraph's natural weakness to Fairy-type moves. So beating this one shouldn't be a problem even in the case Splendifowl was beaten, given that Ash still had Frosthra and either Metalynx or Archilles, the latter two completely fresh.

"I see you're not impressed by my fearsome wraith," Rosalind stated, though her tone made it clear she was expecting such a reaction from Ash.

"I'm not gonna lie, I wasn't expecting to see a Pokemon you had already used in this fight for the second time." Ash admitted. "But I'm not stupid enough to think that this Winotinger is going to be exactly like the first one."

"It seems you've some brains on top of all that brawn, oh brave Knight," Rosalind said. "Go on, I even let you deal the first blow."

Ash knew she wasn't making such an offer of either overconfidence or kindness of her heart. Still, it's better to play this safe.

"Splendifowl, Air Cutter!"

"Counter with Shadow Ball!" Rosalind replied.

Splendifowl beat his wings, sending a pair of blades of compressed air towards the pink rabbit, who brought its paws together, forming a sphere of ghostly power. The two attacks clashed in the middle, producing an explosion of darkness.

"Now, grab him with Psychic!" Rosalind ordered.

Winotinger held out a paw, and made a gripping motion as its eyes glowed pink, just as a pink aura appeared around Splendifowl, who was frozen mid air.

"S-Sple?" the bird helplessly squawked.

"Don't let it control you, Splendifowl! Go for a mirror shot! Aim for the face!" Ash commanded.

"Dodge it!" Rosalind said.

Splendifowl opened his beak and fired yet another stream of metallic energy at the Chimerical Pokemon, who was forced to cancel the attack in order to hop backwards and dodge the move.

"Now, Quick Attack!" Ash ordered.

"Sple, splendi!" Splendifowl whistled, as he folded his wings and dived at the pink rabbit, leaving a trail of fading white light behind.

"Stay your ground!" Rosalind replied.

Ash felt a chill running down his spine. It was obvious Rosalind was planning to let him carry out that move for a potentially bigger payback. However, it was too late to cancel the attack, since Splendifowl was now reaching Winotinger...

"Sple!?"

"What!?"

... and to both trainer and Pokemon's astonishment, Splendifowl phased through Winotinger's body, as if Rosalind's Pokemon was some kind of mirage or illusion. Ash knew Rosalind was smirking behind her mask.

"Psychic again, my vile demon! Put that bird through a world of pain!" Rosalind said before cackling evilly.

Winotinger held out a paw, and making a gripping motion trapped Splendifowl under its telekinetic power. It then repeatedly brought its paw down, slamming the songbird against the hard ground multiple times.

"Splendifowl!" Ash cried.

Once it was done, Splendifowl made no attempt to take off. His body was bruised, the ground was covered in fallen feathers, and his eyes were swirly.

"Splendifowl is unable to battle! The winner is Winotinger!" Ash heard the referee say through his earpiece.

"Thank you, Splendifowl. You did great," Ash gently said, as he recalled his defeated bird. He then stared at the seemingly unassuming Winotinger. How did that Pokemon manage to turn itself intangible? There was something strange with that Pokemon, and Ash was going to find out why. "Metalyx, I choose you!"

The pokeball opened, releasing Ash's Tandorian Grass-type starter.

"Metal!" Metalyx roared upon being released, possibly in an attempt to intimidate her opponent. A failed attempt, given that Winotinger remained impassable.

"And thus the brave Knight calls forth the last of his champions: a mighty feline from the dark jungle!" Rosalind continued narrating. "But would this green beast be enough to defeat the villainess' foul wraith?"

"You can bet that she will be!" Ash confidently stated. "Metalyx, Energy Ball!"

"Lyyyyynx... !" Metalyx opened her jaws, forming an orb of green energy between them, before firing it at the pink rabbit.

"Counter with Shadow Ball!" Rosalind said.

Winotinger formed another sphere of darkness between its paws before launching it forward. Both orbs met in the middle, producing an explosion of onyx and emerald. Just like Ash expected.

"Now Metalyx! Jump forward and use Iron Tail!" Ash commanded.

"Meta!" Metalynx growled as she leaped into the air, her glaive-shaped tail glowing with a silvery sheen.

"Don't let her get close to you! Hold her with Psychic!" Rosalind ordered.

Winotinger held out a paw as its eyes glowed pink. An outline of the same color formed around Metalynx to hold the feline mid-air, stopping her momentum and canceling her attack.

Something Ash was expecting as well.

"Now Metalynx! X-Scissors!" Ash shouted, throwing a fist forwards.

Metalynx's claws glowed with a greenish-yellow light as she delivered a pair of cross-diagonal slashes, sending an X-shaped energy blast at Winotinger. The Chimerical Pokemon was unable to dodge it in time, and was blasted backwards by the attack, canceling the Psychic.

"Well done, Metalynx!" Ash praised his Pokemon, just as she landed on all fours on the ground.

"Meta, ly!" Metalynx roared in appreciation. "Met?"

As Winotinger got back to its feet, it began to flicker and turn blurry as if it was a malfunctioning hologram. Then, much to Ash and Metalynx's surprise, Winotinger transformed into a completely different Pokemon, one Ash had never seen before.

...

"Uh? What's going on?" Bonnie asked, just as confused as Ash.
"What kind of Pokemon is that?"

"Pika?" Pikachu asked as well.

Rosalind's Pokemon, previously a Winotinger, had transformed into a Pokemon Bonnie had never seen before, one with a rather bizarre

appearance: It resembled a bird at first sight, with a long neck, a head that was white on either side with a black stripe running down the center. Its main body was covered by a red coat with a white fluffy trim.

On its head and tail are crowns of multicolored feathers with eyespots on them. Said feathers moved and wiggled in an unnerving way, almost as if they had life of their own.

"I don't know. But it looks pretty strong," Clemont commented.

"And why did it look like a Winotinger before? Can it Transform like Duplicat?" Bonnie asked again.

Clemont shook his head. "That's an ability called Illusion, which allows a Pokemon to change their appearance in order to look like another Pokemon. Rosalind used that ability to trick Ash into thinking he was fighting another Winotinger."

"That's such a great ability to have..." Bonnie admitted.

"Indeed. I believed that only Zorua and Zoroark had such an ability, but guess I was wrong..."

...

" *Dramsama, the Masquerade Pokemon, and Masking's evolution. Psychic/Ghost. A sinister and vengeful Pokémon, it puts its foes into an eternal sleep and steals their souls to add to its tail,*" the Pokedex explained.

So, a Ghost-type. No wonder that Quick Attack didn't land. Oh well, now that Ash had finally found the trick with Rosalind's last Pokemon, the rest of the battle would go smoothly.

Or so he hoped.

"Dramsama, Shadow Ball!" Rosalind called.

"Parry it with Night Slash!" Ash replied.

The Masquerade Pokemon formed a sphere of darkness in front of its face before launching it at Metalynx. An aura of darkness coated the Armored Pokemon's metal arm, as three dark purple claws grew at the end of it. With a mighty swipe, the Shadow Ball was no more, and Metalynx still had enough momentum to reach Dramasama and strike it.

"Dodge!" Rosalind commanded.

Dramsama moved away with astonishing speed. The Masquerade Pokemon didn't walk or run, but slid like a ghost.

"Keep going with Iron Tail!" Ash heatedly ordered.

"Lynx!"

Metalynx pounced at the eldritch looking Pokemon, her glaive-like tail shimmering with a silvery glow, while delivering a flurry of tail swipes at her opponent. However, Dramsama's dodging game proved to be top notch by avoiding all of them, moving from one side to another in the blink of an eye.

"Aerial Ace!" Rosalind called.

Dramsama's tails started to glow with a white light before swiping them at Metalynx, smacking her in the face with them. The Armored Pokemon growled in annoyance as the hit made her tumble backwards.

"And follow up with Psychic, my fearsome wraith!" Rosalind said with a flourish, her voice growing confident.

Dramsama's eyes began to glow pink, as it did its body. However, rather than a telekinetic hold to immobilize Metalynx, it released the attack in the form of a destructive psychic shockwave powerful enough to carve a furrow on the ground as it moved forward, hitting

the Armored Pokemon squarely. Despite type resistance, the attack was powerful enough to blast Metalynx backwards.

"Metalynx!" Ash cried.

Thankfully, Metalynx jumped back to her feet, and glared at Dramsama while baring her fangs. She still had more than enough fighting spirit. That was good.

Maybe it was time to give his Pokemon a little boost. Ash brought a hand under his armored costume, and pulled out the shuriken-shaped keystone holder that Serena had bought him.

"Alright Metalynx, time to take things to the next level!" Ash said, placing two fingers on the Keystone. "Let's do it... TOGETHER!"

Both his Keystone and the Mega Stone attached to Metalynx's collar glowed with a bright light, before shooting beams of light at each other. The tendrils of light merged with one another, binding trainer and Pokemon through energy links. Metalynx's body began to grow and shift, her tail going from curve and glaive-like to straight, and a massive blade growing across her metallic foreleg. Once the transformation was complete, the light faded as soon as it came, the Mega Evolution helix flashing in front of her.

"Ohohoho, look at that folks! Our brave Knight had one last ace under the hole! That jungle feline isn't a mere cat, but had a hidden power within her all along!" Rosalind said. Ash was unable to tell if the emotion in her voice was real or merely acting. "But will that power be enough to vanquish the villainess once for all?"

"Why don't you find it for yourself, huh?" Ash taunted.

"Don't mind if I do, then," Rosalind said, undaunted. "Dramsama, go for another Psychic!"

Dramasama's eyes glowed pink, as it released yet another psychokinetic shockwave that rippled through the air as it barreled

towards Metalynx.

"Metalynx, X-Scissor!" Ash commanded.

"TALY!" Metalynx loudly roared, as she gave a pair of diagonal swipes mid air in opposing directions, launching an X-shaped greenish-yellow energy blast at Drumsama.

The two attacks collided in the middle and struggled against each other for a few seconds. At first it looked like both moves were evenly matched, until the X-Scissor overpowered the Psychic, tearing through it and continuing unimpeded until it smashed against Drumsama. The Masquerade Pokemon let out an otherworldly screech of pain that sent chills down the spines of those who heard it.

"Well done, Metalynx! Follow up with Energy Ball!" Ash commanded.

"Stop it with Shadow Ball!" Rosalind countered.

The Mega Evolved Pokemon charged another emerald orb, this one bigger than the previous ones, and fired it at the Masquerade Pokemon, who launched a sphere of darkness in return. Both attacks met in the middle, but the Energy Ball proved to be the strongest of the two, overpowering the Shadow Ball and smashing against Drumsama, who screeched in pain again.

"Yes, keep going Metalynx! Night Slash!" Ash ordered.

"Dodge it!" Rosalind shouted.

As Metalynx pounced at the eldritch Psychic and Ghost-type Pokemon, the blade running across Metalynx's left arm was covered in a dark purple aura. She swung her darkness-coated blade at Drumsama, but the Masquerade Pokemon slid backwards just in time to dodge it.

"Now blast her away with Psychic!" Rosalind heatedly followed.

"Don't let it, Metalynx! Keep your ground!" Ash encouraged her.

Dramsama's eyes glowed pink, and so did Metalynx's whole body. However, before she could be lifted by her foe's telekinetic's powers, Metalynx dug her claws into the ground, anchoring herself. There was an invisible force trying to pull her into the air, but the steely feline resisted.

"Come on my powerful wraith, you can do it!" Rosalind encouraged her Pokemon.

The glow of Dramsama's eyes grew brighter, as did the aura around Metalynx. The air around the Armored Pokemon started to ripple as the psychic force intensified, but the Mega Evolved Pokemon resisted, as beads of sweat started to run down her head. And in the end, it was Dramsama who gave up to exhaustion first.

"Iron Tail!" Ash ordered.

"Dodge it!" Rosalind countered.

Once again, Dramsama's superior speed allowed it to avoid a swipe of Metalynx's glowing sword-like tail, sliding back to put some distance between it and the powerful feline.

"I have to admit, oh brave Knight, that your final champion is one mighty warrior. Few things are able to stand behind the power you're wielding right now," Rosalind began, as she slowly removed her mask, allowing Ash to see her face, the same face he had seen countless times sitting at the judge panel during Serena's contests. "But unfortunately for you, I have a power that can match yours."

Rosalind showed the reverse of the mask to Ash, and the raven haired teen saw a Keystone embedded on it. And as she did that, Dramsama moved one of its many tails to reveal a metallic clip with a Mega Stone grafted onto it.

"Let's go, my fearsome wraith! Shed the illusions of your trickery, drop your mask of deception! Let our bond bring your hidden power to the surface, reveal your true self!" Rosalind said, sounding like she was chanting some curse. "MEGA EVOLVE!"

Just like it happened with Ash and Metalynx, tendrils of light shot from the Mega Stone and the Keystone, linking to each other and merging into one, creating a connection between trainer and Pokemon that allowed Dramsama to evolve further and acquire a new, more powerful form. As usual, the Mega Evolution helix flashing for a second marked the end of the process.

"Behold, the true form of my wraith, who shall reap the souls of those who dare oppose me!" Rosalind cackled.

Dramsama had become even more eldritch-looking upon Mega Evolving. Its head was bigger and longer, now being half black and half white, like Rosalind's hair and costume. Its tails were not only longer - and continued unnervingly wriggling on their own, now even faster - but now they had also grown to the sides of its body, forming a pair of rudimentary arms.

"We'll see about that! Metalynx, Energy Ball!" Ash ordered.

"Counter with Psychic!" Rosalind replied.

Metalynx fired yet another orb of emerald light from her open jaws, just as Dramsama fired a telekinetic shockwave in the opposite direction. Ash could see how much stronger the attack was by how much the air rippled as it traveled forward. Both attacks met in the middle, and after a couple seconds of struggle the Psychic overpowered the Energy Ball, bursting it like a balloon and continuing unimpeded until it blasted Metalynx.

"Meeee... !" Metalynx whined, as she was pushed backwards.

"Come on Metalynx, get up! I know you're far from done!" Ash encouraged his Pokemon.

The Armored Pokemon looked at Ash nodded fiercely in agreement, before shooting Drumsama a burning glare.

"Your jungle feline is determined, I'll give you that," Rosalind said, smirking confidently. "But determination alone won't win you this battle! Shadow Ball!"

Drumsama fired a sphere of darkness at Metalynx, the attack noticeably bigger than it was before it Mega Evolved. Still, it didn't deter Ash. "Deflect it with Night Slash, and keep moving forward!"

Metalynx's body tensed as the blade that ran across her metallic arm was coated in swirling darkness, before launching herself forward. With a mighty swipe, she was able to slice the Shadow Ball in two, both halves disintegrating into nothing, as Metalynx continued forward.

"Now another Night Slash!" Ash said, throwing a punch forward.

"Dodge it!" Rosalind shouted.

Just as Metalynx swiped her darkened blade at the Masquerade Pokemon, Drumsama slid to the side, narrowly avoiding it.

"Follow up with Iron Tail!" Ash ordered.

Using her growing momentum, Metalynx spun around herself as her tail glowed with a silvery sheen, hitting Drumsama, who was unable to dodge this time around.

"Hypnosis!" Rosalind ordered.

"What!?" Ash shouted. Rosalind really caught him off guard by saving such an attack until now. "Metalynx, quickly, get away!"

Drumsama's eyes glowed an eerie yellow, as it sent psychic waves towards Metalynx. The Armored Pokemon began to softly growl as she fell asleep. However, the moment she did so, she whined in pain

as a black smoky aura surrounded her, almost as if Metalynx was having a particularly bad nightmare.

"Metalynx, quickly, you need to get up!" Ash urged.

"You must have seen the Bad Dream ability before, given that you don't look that surprised by what's happening to your Pokemon," Rosalind observed. "Dramsama acquires such an ability in Illusion's place upon Mega Evolving."

Bad Dreams was an ability that passively harmed nearby Pokemon that were asleep. However, Ash believed that such ability only belonged to Darkrai. Just like with Zoroark and Illusion, it wasn't the case.

"I've encountered a Darkrai more than once in my journeys," Ash bitterly replied.

"I see. Well, my wraith is no Darkrai, but it's strong enough to finish your feline off," Rosalind said, just before her stare turned fierce. "Nightmare!"

A dark purple aura surrounded Dramsama, while ethereal black flames appeared around the sleeping Metalynx, the poor Armored Pokemon began trashing on her sleep as the Nightmare took hold.

"Metalynx, please, wake up!" Ash begged.

"Finish her off with Shadow Ball!" Rosalind's command was merciless.

Dramsama fired a sphere of shadows at the trashing Metalynx, resulting in an explosion of darkness followed by a black cloud. The fact that Ash couldn't hear his Pokemon trashing and growling wasn't a good sign. And indeed, once the smoke dispelled, Metalynx was lying on the ground, motionless, having returned to her base form.

"Metalynx is unable to battle! The winner is Drumsama!" Ash heard the referee say through his earpiece. The boy sighed, and returned his Pokemon. "Thank you, Metalynx. You did your best. Don't worry, Frothra will finish the job."

...

"No! Metalynx lost!" Bonnie moaned, holding Pikachu and Dedenne close to her. "How could she have lost?"

"Rosalind is good. She's able to keep some of her best moves hidden until the time is right to catch her opponents off guard. Not many trainers can do that without crippling themselves," Clemont observed. "No wonder she's considered among Tandor's best leaders."

"At least Ash still has Frothra..." Bonnie said.

"Pikaaaa..." Pikachu nodded, though there was worry in his voice for his trainer. Times like this is when the rodent lamented his predicament the most.

"Still, Frothra took a few hits in his battle against Duplicat. While Drumsama isn't unharmed either, going against a Mega Evolved Pokemon on your own is no small task," Clemont said, looking at Rosalind's eldritch Pokemon. While Ash had been able to take down Mega Evolved Pokemon without using Mega Evolution or Greninja's Battle Bond, he had the advantage of numbers, which he lacked this time around. "Let's hope Ash can prevail..."

...

"And the brave Knight sends back his northern mystic. The very first champion who aided him in his righteous quest," Rosalind narrated. "He was at the beginning, and he's at the end. Kind of poetic, isn't it? Though, that won't be of much help against my fearsome wraith."

"That's what you think! Frosthra has more than enough energy left to beat you!" Ash boasted.

"Thra, fros!" Frosthra buzzed in agreement, though even Ash could tell that his voice lacked the energy from the beginning.

"Bold words, oh brave Knight. Let's see if you can back them up with actions," Rosalind said, as her mouth curved into a feral grin.
"Hypnosis!"

"Protect!" Ash quickly replied.

Sleeping waves were sent in Frosthra's direction, however the Frost Moth Pokemon erected a green energy barrier in front of him to stop them.

"As expected. Catch him with Psychic!" Rosalind commanded.

Dramsama's eyes began to glow pink, as an aura of the same color glowed around Ash's Pokemon, who froze on the spot.

"Use String Shot before it can slam you against the ground!" Ash commanded. "Aim for the face!"

"Frooooo!" Frosthra buzzed, as he fired several threads of sticky substance, all of them latching onto the eldritch Pokemon's face, leaving it temporarily blinded and stopping the attack.

"Yes! Well done, Frosthra! Follow up with Shadow Claw!" Ash encouraged.

As Dramsama removed the sticky substance from its face with its many tails Frosthra dashed forward, both front claws coated in ghostly energy.

"Aerial Ace!" Rosalind ordered.

Frosthra managed to strike first, delivering a swipe with his empowered claw. However, he was repaid in kind in the form of

several of Dramsama's tails, now glowing white, slashing into him and driving him backwards.

"And Hypnosis again!" Rosalind quickly added.

"Protect!" Ash shouted just as quickly.

Dramsama tried to put Frosthra to sleep for the second time, but the result was the same as the first time around.

This seemed to amuse Rosalind, who chuckled at the sight. "What's wrong, oh brave Knight?" she asked in a teasing tone. "Are you afraid that if your ice mystic is put to sleep, he may never wake up again?"

"While I admit that I'm not the brightest bulb in the box, I do learn from experience. I won't let you make this fight a repeat of what you did to Metalynx," Ash retorted.

"Very well then. Why should I want to make you suffer in your dreams when I can cause just as much harm in the real world?" Rosalind shrugged. "Shadow Ball, my wraith!"

"Counter with Blizzard!" Ash replied.

The Masquerade Pokemon gathered dark power in the form of a large orb before firing it away, just as Frosthra began to flap her wings, producing a powerful cold wind with snow and ice shards. When the attacks collided, the Shadow Ball plowed through the Blizzard, much to Ash's shock, but the closer it got, the slower its advance was, until the ice storm stopped and destroyed it completely. Unfortunately, it came at the cost of the Ice-type move exhausting all its power.

"Hypnosis!" Rosalind ordered, seemingly undeterred in her attempts to put Frosthra to sleep.

"Protect!" Ash replied, gritting his teeth. Ash knew that if Frosthra was put to sleep, he wouldn't resist a Nightmare on top of Bad Dreams, hence he had saved Protect to fend off that attack alone, even if it left Frosthra open for other attacks. "Follow up with Signal Beam!"

"Frooooo!" Frosthra buzzed before firing a multicolored beam from his antennae.

"Dodge it and get close!" Rosalind ordered. "And use Shadow Ball!"

Dramsama gracefully slid aside to avoid the Bug-type move, before moving forward. It formed a sphere of ghostly energy without stopping its movement, firing it at Frosthra.

"Parry it with Shadow Claw!" Ash said, refusing to use Protect.

Frosthra delivered a swipe at the coming orb of darkness with his claw coated in the exact kind of energy, destroying it, but not without harming his claw a little.

"Now! Aerial Ace!" Rosalind commanded.

Dramsama reached Frosthra and delivered a powerful swipe with one of its arms made of tails, which were glowing a bright white. The super effective hit knocked Frosthra backwards, the poor insect crying in pain.

"Your ice mystic doesn't look so good, oh brave Knight," Rosalind observed. She was right, though, as the Bug and Ice-type Pokemon appeared to be on his last legs, with bruises across his body and even some cracks on his crystalline wings, and was having trouble hovering above the ground. "I'd say he will go down the next time my wraith lands a hit on him."

"Maybe. But it still looks way better than your Pokemon will look in a few seconds," Ash boasted confidently.

Rosalind shook her head and clicked her tongue in a chastising manner. "It's not wise to make threats you cannot carry-" Rosalind was saying, until it was interrupted by a soft crunching noise, sounding like ice being formed. She then noticed that the tails that formed Drumsama's right arm were now covered in frost. "... wait, what?"

And it didn't end there. The frost condensed into solid ice, as it continued to quickly spread around the Masquerade Pokemon's body, covering it in ice, leaving Drumsama completely frozen.

Ash wished he could take a picture of Rosalind's incredulous expression.

"It's frozen! But... how?"

"That's Frosthra's ability, Deep Freeze," Ash explained. "Frosthra has a chance to completely freeze a Pokemon that touches him, and yours did so with Aerial Ace, multiple times, might I add. It was a risky maneuver, especially since Frosthra wasn't at his one hundred percent, but sometimes you need to take risks in order to win."

"N-No! Drumsama, break out of the ice, quickly!" Rosalind urged.

"I don't think so! Frosthra, Blizzard!" Ash ordered.

Frosthra, feeling energized by a second wind brought by his enemy's sudden predicament, blew yet another gust of winter wind, piling more ice and frost on top of the already frozen Pokemon, ensuring that it wouldn't be able to break out of it anytime soon.

"Drumsama-"

"And now, Signal Beam!" Ash said, throwing a punch forward.

"Froooo... !" Frosthra buzzed, gathering the last bits of his strength for the move. "RA!"

The multicolored beam sailed through the air, blasting the iceberg Drumsama was encased in, sending chunks of ice flying everywhere and launching the Mega Evolved Pokemon backwards. The Masquerade Pokemon fell to the ground in front of Rosalind with a soft thud just before it returned to its base form.

Rosalind looked at her Pokemon with a dumbfounded expression. Drumsama remained there, immobile.

"Drumsama is unable to battle! The winner is Frosthra! And since Rosalind has no more Pokemon, the winner of the match is Ash!" Ash heard the referee hear through his earpiece.

It seemed that the voice of the referee snapped Rosalind from her stupor, as the woman sighed, her shoulders sagged as she returned her defeated Pokemon to its pokeball.

"And after a fierce battle, the last of the villainess' champions fell before the brave Knight and his equally bold companions," Rosalind narrated. "Alone and defeated, the villainess surrendered, and released the princess."

As soon as she said that, the cage where Serena was being kept was lowered until it touched the ground. With a snapping sound, the cage opened on its own, allowing Serena to get out.

"And once his quest was over and his princess was safe, the two of them returned to their land," Rosalind continued. He then looked at the duo and grinned savagely. "But alas, since the princess was not only his ruler, but also his lover, he rewarded his brave Knight... with a kiss."

While Rosalind's words caught Ash by surprise, Serena's expression hadn't changed. She looked at Ash, and smiled.

"What do you say, my brave knight? Will you accept your princess' reward?" she said, giggling a little.

Ash at first was a little awkward over kissing in front of a large audience, but he quickly nodded, and the two of them locked her lips into a passionate kiss.

The public erupted into a wild cheer and applauded. Ash could swear he could hear Bonnie's squeals above the roar of the public.

Frosthra then launched himself at Ash and Serena, hugging both of them with an arm each, and smearing frost over them.

"Fro, frosthra!" the insect happily buzzed.

"Thanks a lot, buddy. You did way more than I could have asked for," Ash told his Pokemon. He pulled Frosthra's pokeball and recalled him. "Take a good rest. After this match, you deserve it."

"And thus, our tale comes to an end," Rosalind said. She placed herself between Ash and Serena, grabbed them by their hands, and made them bow alongside her towards the public just as the curtains went down.

...

Once the curtains were finally down, Rosalind took Ash and Serena to what appeared to be a break room. Once there, she let out a sigh of exhaustion.

"Oh boy, what a battle! I knew you were going to be a challenge, but..." she huffed. "You almost made me break character, and I *never* break character until the curtains go down."

"Thank you. You were a tough nut to crack. No wonder you're among Tandor's greatest Gym Leaders, hehe," Ash chuckled. He then frowned a little at the thespian. "Though, what was that kiss at the end? Serena and I are a couple, but what if we weren't? It would have been very uncomfortable."

"Relax, Ash," Serena said, placing a reassuring hand on the raven haired teen's shoulder. "Rosalind came to see me before the battle and asked me if we were dating and if we'd be willing to kiss should you win your match. I said yes to both, though maybe I shouldn't have assumed that you'd be okay with kissing in front of so many people..."

"Eh, it's okay. If she at least asked about us before making us kiss, then I don't mind," Ash reassured her.

That moment, the door opened, and Clemont, Bonnie and Pikachu entered the room. Pikachu wasted no time and quickly climbed Ash and perched on his shoulder.

"Oh my goodness, it was so awesome!" Bonnie squealed, jumping up and down. "Such an amazing kiss! You have to do it again!"

"Bonnie, shouldn't we congratulate Ash for his victory instead?" Clemont asked a bit exasperatedly.

"Eh, I have seen Ash beating many Gym Leaders," Bonnie said in a deadpan tone before stars returned to her eyes. "But this is the first time I see Ash and Serena kiss! And with those outfits! It was SO ROMANTIC!"

"It's great to see somebody liking my artistic choices so much," Rosalind chuckled. "But your friend is right, the important part here is your victory over me. So now that the match is over, I should give you this," Rosalind said, pulling out a small object from one of her pockets. "For making me taste defeat, I give you the Drama Badge. Complimenti, ragazzo."

Ash accepted the badge. It was shaped like a mask, half black and half white, like the mask Rosalind had been wearing for most of the match.

"I won the Drama Badge!" Ash said, raising the badge above his head.

"Pi-pikachu!" Pikachu cheered alongside him.

"Well, now that you defeated me, you have two choices: you can either go north towards Snowbank Town and challenge Vaeryn, or take a ship south to Tsukinami Island and challenge the Gym Leaders there," Rosalind told him.

"I think I'll go to Snowbank," Ash decided. "Since there's something I need to show to Vaeryn."

"Alright. Good luck against him, then," Rosalind said, before looking at Serena. "And guess I'll be seeing you at the Grand Festival. Don't be late, alright?"

"Don't worry, I wouldn't miss it for anything in the world," Serena reassured her.

...

By the time Ash and his friends left the theater, it was already nighttime.

"What a match," Ash huffed, before he let out a yawn. "Oh boy, I'm so spent! I think I'm going to bed early today."

"Pika..." Pikachu said, patting Ash on the head.

"Indeed. Rosalind has been quite the challenging adversary," Clemont commented. "And I have the feeling that the battle against Vaeryn will be more intense than that one-on-one you had after we met him for the first time..."

"Honestly, that only makes me more excited to face him!" Ash replied, before yawning again.

"Guess not excited enough to make up for all the energy you and your Pokemon spent today," Serena giggled.

"Hey, like I said-" Ash was about to reply, but he was interrupted by the beeping noise of his Pokegear. Wondering who could be calling him at this time, he looked at the caller ID, and raised an eyebrow. "Professor Sycamore...?"

That got everybody's attention.

Ash accepted the call, and the Kalosian professor's face appeared on the screen. He looked a little upset.

"Hello, Ash. Sorry for the late call. I'm aware it's nighttime on Tandor right now, but this is important," the black haired man began.

"Hello, professor," Ash replied. "And sure, if it's important, I don't mind what hour you call. Do you need anything from us?"

"It's... well," Sycamore sighed as he rubbed the back of his head. "Maybe I'm overreacting but... well, I've been trying to contact Alain recently, but neither he nor Mairin are picking up their Holocasters."

"Oh..." was all Ash could answer.

"Are you afraid something might have happened to them?" Clemont asked.

"Oh, no! I'm sure it's nothing! Maybe they're somewhere with no connectivity, or maybe their Holocasters broke, or something like that," Sycamore tried to downplay. "Still, I can't help but feel a little worried. We last talked a couple days ago, and Alain told me that you guys met him, right?"

"Yes. He and Ash even had a friendly spar," Serena interceded.

"Alain is one of the strongest trainers there is. I'm sure that he's okay, professor," Ash confidently stated.

"Yeah, I know. Though... if you run into him again, tell him to call me as soon as he can, okay?" Sycamore asked.

"Sure thing, professor!" Ash said.

The call ended, and the group of four continued their walk towards the Pokemon Center.

And despite Ash's words, they couldn't help but feel a little worried over Alain and Mairin.

Author's Note: And thus, Ash wins his sixth badge! Was there ever any doubt? XD

I'm glad I had the chance to finally showcase Frosthra's ability, since I think it's one of the coolest (pun totally intended) new abilities introduced in Pokemon Uranium. While 30% chance to freeze on contact might seem like a lot, it is balanced by the fact that Frosthra isn't exactly a tanky Pokemon.

Kudos to hirowriter who guessed that the match/play would end with Ash and Serena sharing a kiss in front of the audience, much to Bonnie's delight.

Now, we say goodbye to Venesi City, but only for the time being, since we will be back to see Serena compete at the Grand Festival.

Look at that, it seems, like Sycamore hasn't been able to contact Alain and Mairin for some time, and it's starting to get kind of worried. But hey, I'm sure that they're both fine and his worries are unfounded ;)

Thanks a lot to 61394, Fox McCloud, Lipeghoul, Guest, MarkusDarkus87, MegaSalamence64 and hirowriter for reviewing last chapter, and special thanks to my betareader Viroro-kun, whose edits and suggestions made this chapter so much better.

Next time, the conflict between Serena and Oblivicorn finally reaches its boiling point. Until then, make sure you leave a review for this chapter with your thoughts and opinions.

Serena's Night-Mare

Chapter 49:

Serena's Night-Mare

Maskara Island

The day after Ash's victory at Rosalind's Pokemon Gym, the group decided it was time to leave Venesi City and head towards Snowbank Town, in the northmost part of East Tandor. They'll have to cross Maskara Island, then take a ferry and go to Silverport Town first.

"Come on Dunseraph, you can do it! Steel Wing!" Ash commanded.

"Duuuun... !" Dunseraph concentrated as he channeled his inner power to his wings, which began to flicker with a silvery light.

"Pi, pika, pikachupi!" Pikachu, perched on top of the dragon's head, advised. While Steel Wing wasn't exactly like Iron Tail, the principle behind the attacks was the same, so the rodent felt he could help Dunseraph with the move.

The flickered stop as the silver glow became more stable, and the God Snake Pokemon dived towards a rock column - helpfully manifested by Pangoro's Stone Edge so it could be used as target practice - and smashed his wing against it. It managed to cut halfway through the stone pillar before the silvery light disappeared, and Dunseraph cried in pain upon hurting his wing.

"Dun, dunse!" he cried as he nursed his wing.

"Take it easy, Dunseraph. You almost got it there!" Ash encouraged his Pokemon.

"Chupi!" Pikachu agreed.

After spending the whole morning and a good part of the afternoon walking, the group decided to set up camp and do some training per Ash's suggestion. Despite defeating Rosalind, the raven haired teen knew he couldn't slack off, as his victory was a very narrow one, and he wanted to be better prepared for his match against Vaeryn.

And of course, Dunseraph wasn't the only Pokemon trying to learn a new move.

"Chilles!" Archilles growled as he dashed forward, while a claw-shaped green aura appeared around one of his front claws, delivering a wide swipe mid-air.

"Well done Archilles! Keep going and you'll have that Dragon Claw down in no time!" Ash encouraged his last captured Pokemon.

"Archi!" Archilles happily cried in return.

But Ash and his Pokémon weren't the only ones hard at work, since Serena wanted to make sure she would be ready for the Grand Festival, even if it was more than a month away. A month passed very quickly after that.

"Alright Coatlith, once again, Dragon Rage!" Serena commanded.

"Cooooo... !" Coatlith cried as blue and purple bits of flame poured from her mouth, before opening it, launching a blazing torrent of the same color over Sylveon, who had volunteered to be the dragon's 'training dummy', so to speak.

"Yes! Very well! Keep practicing and you'll have it in no time!" Serena told her, beaming.

"Co, coatlith!" Coatlith happily cried upon hearing her trainer's praise, before continuing practicing the move on Sylveon.

"And Delphox, let's see that Mystical Fire!" Serena asked her starter Pokemon.

Delphox nodded and drew a fire circle with her ignited wand. But when she was about to launch a stream of flames through it, said circle quickly broke down and the fire petered out, resulting in a mere Flamethrower.

"Deee..." Delphox sadly moaned.

"Hey don't worry, nobody expects you to get it the first try," Serena reassured her, placing a comforting hand on the Fox Pokemon's furry shoulder. "Remember, be persistent and you'll do it!"

"Del!" Delphox nodded, and continued trying to master the move.

She glanced at the rest of her Pokemon, who were either trying to master new moves like Delphox or Coatlich, or simply honing skills they already had, like Pangoro or Syrentide.

And then there was Oblivicorn, who was lazily lying under the shade of a tree, training being the last thing on her mind.

The honey blonde frowned as both anger and frustration bubbled inside her. So far, she hadn't made any progress with Oblivicorn, who refused not just to train or battle under her, but to even listen or even acknowledge her as her trainer, which was starting to get under her skin. She was about to power walk towards her and give her wayward Pokemon a piece of her mind before she stopped herself.

" *No, I can't come as forceful, or else I'll make everything worse,*" she reminded herself, while taking a deep breath in order to calm down, and continued walking at a more relaxed pace.

However, when she was about to reach her asleep Pokemon, something Ash said drew her attention.

"Come on Greninja, that move will be ours today!" Ash said, crossing his arms in front of his face. "Let's do it, together!"

Even if they weren't in the middle of a fight, the transformation triggered by the Battle Bond wasn't any less spectacular, as Ash's Kalosian started transforming while inside a spiraling torrent of water, which condensed into a watery shuriken which was attached to his back. Was Ash trying to do what she was thinking...?

"Now, Greninja, let's take all of our power and bring it forward!" Ash excitedly said, pumping his fists. "Water Shuriken!"

"Greeeeee... !" Greninja began as he was engulfed by a vortex of water for the second time in a row. When the Vortex burst, there was a massive blazing orange shuriken. "NINJA!"

"That's not enough! Let's keep pushing forward!" Ash shouted, though Serena could sense some strain in his voice, worrying the honey blonde. "There's still more to that attack! One more push Greninja!"

"G-Gre... !" Greninja tried to pour even more of his and Ash's power into the attack. A third watery vortex began to form around him. Serena could hear Clemont and Bonnie gasped as Greninja pushed his limits even further beyond. "Nin-jaaaaaaa... !"

"Argh!"

The watery vortex petered out, dissolving into nothingness, as both trainer and Pokemon collapsed on the ground, clutching their bodies in pain.

"Ash!" Serena cried, as he rushed towards him, Clemont and Bonnie doing the same, while some of their Pokemon went to assist Greninja.

...

"Ugh..." Ash groaned as he tried to get up. His head was spinning. He felt a hand gently but firmly grabbing his shoulder.

"Easy there, Ash," Serena's voice said. "Take it slow."

As his head started to slowly spin, his vision focused and became less blurry. Serena, Clemont and Bonnie were all around him, looking worried. A couple meters away was Greninja, back in his normal form, being helped to sit up by Pikachu and Delphox.

"What happened...?" Ash asked.

"Both you and Greninja were trying to go for that buffed up version of the Water Shuriken, and then BLAM! Both of you collapsed!" Bonnie said, making a clapping noise with her palms for added emphasis.

"I see," Ash said, as disappointment filled him. "So it happened again, huh..."

"A-Again?" Clemont croaked. "Has... has this happened to you before?"

"Yeah, during a sparring match against Serena the day of our date at Venesi City," Ash said, recalling that sparring match against Serena's Coatlich.

"No, it wasn't as bad that time," Serena said, before looking Ash in the eye. "You collapsed and were in pain, but you didn't faint like it happened now.. Ash, what were you trying to do?"

"I feel there's something more to Greninja's power. I know it!" Ash said, sparing a glance at his trusty Kalosian Pokemon, who appeared to be recovered. "I just thought if we tried a little harder, we might be able to pull that Water Shuriken after all..."

"Ash, after what happened here, I don't want you to do this ever again," Serena stated. Ash was ready to protest, but his girlfriend's glare silenced him. "You can't keep hurting yourself and Greninja like this! What if something happened to either of you that leaves you with permanent side effects, huh?"

Ash wanted to protest so badly, but he found himself unable to. Serena brought up a very good point, and even if he didn't do it for himself, he had to do it for Greninja.

"Alright, this will be the last time we'll try to do that," Ash stated.

Serena smiled. "Good. Plus, you don't need any kind of super move to be strong and win. Just keep training like you've always been doing, and everything will be fine."

"I know, but..." Ash began, as he grabbed a handful of grass from the ground. "It's just so frustrating! I know we're on the verge of something amazing! I know there's just something missing in order to make it work, but I can't figure out what it is..."

"One thing's for sure, you're not going to do it by overexerting yourself and Greninja like that," Serena told him.

"I know, I shouldn't have pushed myself and Greninja like that. But I just felt that if I just tried a trifle harder..." Ash wondered.

"Maybe it's not a matter of trying harder," Bonnie chimed in.

"Huh?" Ash said, tilting his head, his curiosity aroused by Bonnie's observation. "What do you mean?"

"I mean... what if it's like Mega Evolution? You know, Mega Evolution can't happen without a Keystone and a Mega Stone. So maybe you need something like a Keystone to make that attack work," Bonnie explained.

"So, kinda like a Z-move?" Ash asked, his mind going to Leona whenever she used those moves. "I dunno. But I don't feel that's what we're missing."

"Maybe the move needs to meet some conditions for it to work," Serena interceded. "Like how Counter won't work unless hit by a physical move first, or how Sucker Punch only works if the opposing

Pokemon is readying a move. Oh, and there was this move I learned about during my research, Aurora something, that only works when it's hailing."

"Oh, that reminds me!" Clemont said, his face lightening up a little. "I was planning to test Mega Evolution with Electruxo now. Maybe you should do the same with Archilles."

"You're right!" Ash said in realization. "Oh man, I was so blinded by wanting to master that advanced form of the Water Shuriken that I forgot about that I could Mega Evolve Archilles now."

Upon hearing that, Archilles shot Ash a flat stare.

"So, are you up for a sparring match?" Clemont asked.

"Sure-" Ash began.

"Yes but better rest a little longer. It's still early, and better make sure you're at your best," Serena told him. But despite her gentle tone, Ash knew that she wasn't going to admit any rebuttals.

"Alright," the raven haired teen agreed.

"Good. I'll go bring you something to eat," Serena said, as she walked towards their camp.

...

After resting a little and eating a small sandwich, Ash was ready to continue his training. Just like Clemont suggested, the two of them fought with their respective Tandorian starters, trading a few attacks in their base form as a warm up. Clemont was the first one to give a go at his new power up.

"The future is now thanks to Mega Evolution! Come on Electruxo, show them what you can do!" Clemont said, as he touched with two fingers the Keystone on his lightning bolt-shaped golden cufflink.

The Keystone and the Mega Stone attached to Electruxo's collar began to glow, shooting tendrils of light towards each other. As the tendrils merged and linked trainer and Pokemon, Electruxo began to glow brightly as his body grew and shifted. As Electruxo stopped glowing, the Mega Evolution helix flashed in front of him, bringing the process to an end.

"Whoa! Electruxo looks so cool Mega Evolved!" Bonnie cooed.

Mega Electruxo retained the same body shape, though his skin was now a darker shade of blue, his dorsal fin way more prominent, and red and blue fins had formed at the end of his legs and tail. There were four red tentacle-like appendages ending in round yellow bulbs, two growing out of his head and the other two from his rear.

"Ele, electrux!" Electruxo cried as the four bulbs at the end of the red tentacles crackled with yellow electricity.

Then, the sky began to slowly darken as it was covered by gray clouds. There was thunder, followed by rain.

"It's raining?" Bonnie asked. "But I thought you guys said it would be sunny today!"

"Nenene!" Dedenne protested as well.

"This is no natural rain. There were almost no clouds a minute ago, and now it's overcast," Clemont observed, but smiled upon realizing what was going on. "Of course! Electruxo's ability upon Mega Evolving must have changed to Drizzle!"

Serena pulled out her Pokedex and checked Electruxo's entry. "Hey, that's right!"

"Alright Electruxo, let's see how strong you are now! Between Mega Evolution and the rain, your Water-type moves have to be a sight to behold!" Clemont said. "Aqua Jet!"

"Ele!" Electruxo cried as water began to swirl around him, covering him entirely in liquid, before shooting forward. The water cloak was so big and roared with such intensity that rather than a watery missile, Electruxo looked like a living tsunami.

"Dodge it with Flame Impact!" Ash ordered.

The fire on Archiless' elbows, knees and tails flared with more intensity, albeit a bit less than usual thanks to the ongoing rain, as fire spread all over his body, before moving sideways. However, he wasn't fast enough and Electruxo managed to graze him, causing enough harm to blast the Fire Raptor Pokemon backwards.

"Chilles!" Archilles cried in pain.

"So powerful!" Bonnie said in amazement.

"Between the Mega Evolution, the rain, and the fact that Archilles is very vulnerable to water, no wonder he took such a hit," Serena said.

"El, elec!" Electruxo cried, puffing his chest in pride at the sight of his own power.

"Ar! Archi!" Archilles growled, jumping back to his feet and looked at Ash.

The raven haired teen nodded, understanding perfectly what the Fire and Ground-type Pokemon wanted, and held the shuriken-shaped necklace that held his Keystone. "Come Archilles, let's do it, together! Mega Evolve!"

The process started anew, with Archilles glowing bright and changing once the forked beams of light shot by the Mega Stone on his collar and the Keystone Ash was touching merged, the transformation ending with the Mega Evolution gelix flashing in front of him.

"AAAARCH!" Archilles roared, letting out a plume of fire from his mouth.

Like Electruxo, Archilles' body shape remained largely unchanged, being that of a two-legged theropod, though his body was less lean and more thick and packed with muscle. There were now multiple orange feathers at the side of his face, his elbows, knees and tail. The red shells on his head and back now had white spikes growing out of them. While his elbows and knees were no longer on fire, the flames from his head and tail were much bigger now.

Then, the rain stopped, and just like they came, the clouds disappeared just as quickly. The sunlight appeared to be much brighter, and the temperature began to rise.

"The weather changed again," Bonnie said. Then she beamed and pointed to the sky. "Oh, look, a rainbow! So pretty!"

"That has to be an ability of Mega Archilles," Serena stated. "I remember Trevor's Charizard also had such an ability upon Mega Evolving that made the weather all nice and sunny."

Not that it had helped him much.

"Yeah, that's Drought," Clemont confirmed. "So, Electruxo and Archilles have weather-altering abilities upon Mea Evolving, huh? Interesting."

"What's Metalyx's ability, then? Because we saw her Mega Evolve a few times and the weather didn't change," Bonnie asked.

Serena had her Pokedex in her hand already, trying to find the answer. "Metalyx's ability upon Mega Evolving is Fireproof, which reduces damage taken from Fire-type moves," she read, before pocketing the device. "Guess we haven't seen it in action since none of the Pokemon she had fought against while Mega Evolved used Fire-type moves."

"Still, it's a good ability to have, given Metalyx's overall vulnerability to fire," Clemont added.

"I'll keep that in mind for the future," Ash said, before his eyes returned to his Mega Evolved Pokemon. "Shall we continue the battle?"

"Sure!" Clemont replied. "Come on Electruxo, use Scald!"

"Counter with Flamethrower!" Ash replied.

The battle resumed. Bonnie and a number of Pokemon watched it completely enraptured, but Serena unfortunately had something that required her attention. Something that she has been putting off for quite some time now, but felt that she should solve as soon as possible.

Upon reaching her wayward Pokemon, napping under a tree, Serena took a deep breath, steeled herself, and smiled.

"Hey there," Serena sheepishly greeted. "Can we talk?"

Oblivicorn merely opened her eyes, glared at Serena and closed them again.

"Listen, I know things between us have been less than great," Serena cringed inwardly at how much that euphemism understated the situation between trainer and Pokemon. "But things aren't going to get any better if we just pretend like there's nothing wrong."

Oblivicorn laid there, pretending to be asleep.

"Come on. I know I did something to earn your scorn, but I won't be able to make up for my mistake unless you tell me what I did wrong," Serena insisted.

Oblivicorn didn't pay her any attention.

"Unless you think I have to figure it out myself," Serena said in a mildly defeatist tone. If that was the case, she didn't know where to begin. She had replayed time and time again the events surrounding

Oblivicorn's evolution, and she couldn't remember doing anything to anger the Fairy and Dark-type Pokemon.

As usual, Oblivicorn didn't react to that either.

Serena sighed despondently. "Come on Oblivicorn, I'm trying to make an effort. Just give me a hand here! Uh, hoof?" she quickly amended.

Oblivicorn opened her eyes again, shooting Serena an unamused stare, before getting up on her four legs and slowly moving away.

"No!" Serena said, quickly getting in the way of Oblivicorn, who seemed surprised by Serena's sudden boldness. "I'm not going to give up until you tell me what's wrong!"

Oblivicorn's surprise was quickly replaced by annoyance as she tried to sidestep Serena, but the honey blonde continued to obstruct the equine.

"So please, tell me! Help me here!" Serena pleaded, as she continued to block the Pokemon from moving. "You can't be okay with this either! I know you're unhappy, I can see it in your eyes!"

Oblivicorn huffed, her annoyance slowly turning into anger. Serena knew that she needed to tread carefully, since the Dark Horse Pokemon had shown in the past not to be above harming her directly. But Serena didn't care.

"I know that deep down, the little Minicorn I rescued from that Team Omega base is still there! You have to-" Serena said, but suddenly stopped.

Serena's heart skipped a beat as Oblivicorn fixed her with the most hate-filled glare the honey blonde had ever seen, feeling like she was next to a bomb that was about to go off.

And indeed, it went off.

Letting out a loud neigh, Oblivicorn reared back, dangerously waving her front hooves at Serena, who yelped in terror and fell back on her butt.

"Oblivicorn... !" Serena pleaded, as she saw the Dark Horse Pokemon walk dangerously towards her, her yellow eyes glowing with an eerie glint. "No, please, don't..."

"GORO!"

One moment, Oblivicorn was in front of the fallen Serena, stalking towards her, and a moment later there was a black and white blur, followed by a hit, and Oblivicorn was sent flying sideways.

"Pan, pangoro!" Pangoro angrily yelled, placing himself between Oblivicorn and Serena, punching his open paw.

"Pangoro!" Serena called, her heart beating so fast it threatened to burst out of her chest. "Th-Thank you!"

"Syl!" Sylveon cried, as she landed next to Pangoro.

"Co, coatlith!" Coatlith cried, floating above the other two Pokemon, the three of them forming a barrier around their trainer.

Oblivicorn quickly got back to her hooves, shot Serena one last hateful glare, and galloped away.

"No, wait, don't go!" Serena said as she tried to reach after her, but Oblivicorn quickly disappeared in the distance.

"Serena!" Ash said, as he, Clemont and Bonnie rushed to her. "Are you okay?"

"What happened? Did Oblivicorn try to attack you again?" Bonnie asked, worried.

"Yes, but that's not important! She ran away again!" Serena said, before looking at Coatlith. "Coatlith, I need you! Help me find her

from above! Everybody else, return!"

"Serena, wait!" Ash pleaded, but Serena didn't listen to him. The only thing on her mind right now was Oblivicorn.

Jumping onto Coatlith's back just before recalling the rest of her Pokemon, the jungle dragon soared into the sky, flying in the same direction Oblivicorn had run away. In no time, it gained enough altitude to allow Serena to spot the runaway mare.

"Come on, come on," Serena nervously said, as she began to look around. From her vantage point in the sky, she could see many Pokemon wandering around, but none of them were Oblivicorn. "Can she run so fast to lose us already...?"

"Coat!" Coatlith cried, encouraging Serena to keep looking as she kept flying at a steady pace.

"You're right. I said I wouldn't give up on Oblivicorn, and I won't!" Serena declared, as she continued to look down. Then, she saw a black blur blitzing through the grass, sometimes hidden by the trees, but there was no doubt it was Oblivicorn. "Over there! Quickly, don't lose sight of her, Coatlith!"

"Li, lith!" Coatlith affirmatively cried, as she followed the speeding equine.

Serena was confident that Oblivicorn wouldn't be able to get away no matter how fast she ran. Eventually, she'd reach the coast, and it's not like the people operating the ferry would allow a seemingly wild Pokemon into the ship.

"Serena!" Ash's voice snapped her out of her thoughts as Dunseraph caught up with Coatlith, the angelic dragon also carrying Clemont and Bonnie on his back besides his trainer.

"Guys, I'm seeing Oblivicorn down there!" Serena said. "Once she reaches the shore, let's land and get ready for the worst! I'll try to

reason with her, but I'm afraid she won't come back quietly."

"Hey... it doesn't look like she's heading to the shore..." Ash pointed out.

Looking back at the black and red blur, Serena realized it was true. She was heading towards a small mount at the northern edge of the island.

"Wait, isn't that...?" she began.

"The Labyrinth. The tunnel people used to travel to the northern part of the region before they put the service ferry in use," Clemont explained.

"She isn't trying to go there, isn't she?" Ash asked. "A Pokemon like Oblivicorn won't be able to move that well inside a cave..."

"Maybe she realized we were tracking her from above, so she decided to use that cave to lose us," Clemont surmised as she adjusted his glasses.

And indeed, much to Serena's frustration, Oblivicorn disappeared behind the entrance to the Labyrinth.

"Let's go. She won't be able to run that fast inside a cave," Serena commanded, her voice like cold steel, as Coatlich began to descend.

"Of course. I don't know how, but we always, *a/ways* manage to get inside some stupid cave..." Bonnie protested, letting out a huff.

...

Once they reached the entrance to the Labyrinth, the group dismounted from their flying steeds, recalled them back to their respective pokeballs and penetrated into the cave. Ash let out Archilles while Serena released Delphox, so the two Fire-type Pokemon would provide illumination to the pitch black cave.

"So, do any of you guys know anything about this Labyrinth place?" Bonnie asked, arms crossed and brow furrowed, her displeasure for having to go through another cave evident. "Because the name alone doesn't fill me with confidence."

Serena already had her tablet opened with a website on information of the cave up. "According to this, it's a place people come to find Mega Stones and fossils, similar to Comet Cave," Serena explained. All of them looked at each other a little worried, the events of that cave still present in their minds. "Though, it says that as long as we don't perturb the local Pokemon, they'll leave us alone and we'll be fine."

"Well, that's something. At least we don't have that dumbass Theo with us to provoke Pokemon into attacking us," Bonnie said, a little more relieved.

"Bonnie!" Clemont chastised her.

"What? It's true!" Bonnie protested. "Don't you remember that all that went wrong in Comet Cave was because Theo went and attacked that Comite? Because / do."

"I know but... you don't need to be so mean," Clemont said.

"Yeah. And even if Theo was with us, I'm sure he learned from the experience and wouldn't cause any problems," Ash said, his voice full of confidence in the redhead.

No one contested Ash. As they walked, some Pokemon that lurked in the dark scurried away the moment they were illuminated by the light provided by the Fire-types, like a pair of Modrille who quickly dug underground, or a Sableye that ran away after hissing at the outsiders.

"So, how are we going to find Oblivicorn?" Bonnie asked. "Because this cave looks to be pretty big. She could be anywhere,"

"Now that's a good question," Ash agreed, looking around as he scratched his temple.

Clemont snickered as his glasses shone with an eerie light.

"Oh no..." Bonnie moaned.

"I'm glad you asked, little sister, because I have the perfect invention to help us with this! The future is now, thanks to science! Clemontic Gear On!" Clemont said in a bombastic manner.

Clemont's Aipom Arm picked from his backpack the invention in question and placed it on his hands. It was a contraption shaped like a Magnemite, with a pair of satellite dishes on its top and a long cable with a connecting port on it.

"Behold, the Locator of Lost or Escaped Pokemon!" Clemont said, showing everybody the mechanical Magnemite. "This invention of mine is able to locate and track down any Pokemon that belongs to a trainer!"

"Science is so amazing!" Ash gushed, stars twinkling in his eyes.

"Indeed. I've been working on this for some time, given that this isn't the first time one of our Pokemon gets lost," Clemont explained, and Serena's mind went to the most recent occurrence, Dedenne being lost in Baikal Forest and running into the Anthell. If it wasn't for Pikachu, who knows what would have been of the little rodent in that den of ravenous bugs. "With this, we'll be able to find Oblivicorn no matter where she is!"

"Really? That's great!" Serena said, sharing Ash joyous mood. "How does it work?"

"First of all, do you have Oblivicorn's pokeball?" Clemont asked. Wordlessly, Serena handed him the requested object, and the inventor attached it to the long cord. The screen, which was where Magnemite's eye would be, lighted up, as the satellite dishes on the

top began to spin. "Alright, I got a signal! She's not that far away. Come on, we'll follow her in no time."

"Good. Lead the way, Clemont," the honey blonde said.

Clemont nodded, and following the indications displayed on the screen began to walk, with Ash, Serena and Bonnie quietly following him, flanked by Delphox and Archilles.

They walked in silence for some time, the only noise coming from their own steps, the soft hums and beeps from Clemont's machine, water droplets falling from the stalactites to the ground, and the quiet murmurs of the wild Pokemon wandering the area. That was, until Ash decided to break the silence and asked Serena something.

"Uhm, Serena, if you don't mind me asking..." Ash quietly began. "What happened with Oblivicorn? Why did she get all angry like that?"

"I was just trying to get her to open up to me, so we could fix our relationship, and then she became so furious all of sudden..." Serena began.

"What did you tell her that would make her react that way?" Ash asked. "I can't imagine you saying something so offensive to make her react like this."

Serena had replayed the events of the day Minicorn evolved in her mind time after time in order to find out what went wrong that day. She didn't find anything, but it's possible that given how tumultuous that day turned out to be, she had missed some crucial detail. However, since Oblivicorn's latest outburst had happened not even an hour ago, everything was fresh in her mind.

"I was only asking her to open up to me so we could talk and put this behind us," Serena said, as she began to replay the conversation - or better said, monologue - with Oblivicorn until she became

enraged. She gasped and brought her hands to her mouth. "Oh no...!"

"What? What did you tell her?" Ash asked.

"I said that I knew that the Minicorn I rescued from Team Omega was still there," Serena said, as the realization filled her with a sense of unease and even dread. "What if... what if that's the reason behind Oblivicorn's rowdy attitude? Because deep down I still see her as a Minicorn and refuse to accept her as what she is now?"

"Come on Serena, you know that's not true. You always treat all your Pokemon the same both before and after they evolved," Ash reminded her.

"This isn't the same. Ash, you know I was so eager for Minicorn to turn into Kiricorn, but then she touched that Dusk Stone," Serena told him. "I like to think that I would accept every Pokemon no matter what... but what if that's not true? What if I'm only deluding myself into thinking that I accept Oblivicorn for what she is, but she knows I'm lying to her?"

"Serena, we both know that's not true. There's no one more loving and compassionate than you," Ash stated, grabbing her hand. "And even if you made a mistake regarding Oblivicorn, I'm pretty sure you'll be able to fix it and convince her you meant no harm."

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu nodded in agreement.

"You think so?" Serena asked, as she grabbed her blue ribbon, and smiled. "Thank you."

Ash smiled back at her. "Plus, if all else fails, remember what I told you."

"Have faith in my Pokemon, and they'll believe in me as well," Serena repeated, like a proud student showing what she learned to her teacher.

"We're getting close!" Clemont said out loud.

"Really?" Serena asked, the excitement in her voice obvious.

"According to the locator, Oblivicorn is inside the chamber just behind that entrance!" Clemont said.

Excited by the prospect of finding Serena's wayward Pokemon, the group rushed to cross the tunnel Clemont had told them to.

What they saw, though, wasn't something they were expecting.

"Oh... there she is," Ash said in a muted tone.

Because Oblivicorn was there, just like Clemont had stated. What Clemont's device failed to warn them was that Dark Horse Pokemon was at the other end of a large fissure in the ground that split the chamber in two, almost ten meters long and three meters deep. At the bottom of the fissure there was a torrential river, the water flowing filling the air with noise. There were five pillars of rock that connected both ends of the fissure, explaining how Oblivicorn had crossed it.

The rebellious mare quickly noticed the four humans' presence, and turned towards them, staring at them in a way that almost dared them to come and get her.

A challenge Serena was more than ready to accept.

"Wait, Serena. Let's use our fliers to carry us across the gap," Ash suggested.

"We do that, and Oblivicorn will just run away again," Serena said, taking a step forward.

"Serena, you aren't planning on crossing that by yourself, are you?" Clemont asked, his voice laced both worry and incredulity. "Those pillars don't look very stable! Plus, they're probably wet, so you won't be able to get a stable footing on them!"

"I know, but I need to do this," Serena said, now at the edge of the crack. She looked at Oblivicorn. "Oblivicorn, whatever I did to you to earn your scorn, both now and in the past, I'm sorry. I'm very sorry."

She hopped onto the first pillar, and landed with little difficulty. Oblivicorn didn't move from her spot.

"If you no longer want me as your trainer... I will respect your wishes and let you go. I say I wouldn't give up on you, but I don't want you to be unhappy. If you're not meant to be at my side, then so be it."

She hopped onto the second pillar.

"I'm still not sure what made you turn your back on me after you evolved. I tried and tried, but I came up with nothing," Serena continued. "If you think that I don't like you better than you were a Minicorn, or that I would have preferred if you were a Kiricorn... that's wrong! I will love you no matter what, like I love all my Pokemon!" Serena shouted.

"Del, delphox!" Delphox cried in agreement, something Serena deeply appreciated.

Oblivicorn continued staring at her, looking almost intrigued. Were Serena's words getting through the equine's head? The possibility filled the honey blonde with resolve.

"I promise you that I will give you all the love and respect you deserve! Just please, give me a second chance!" the Kalosian girl pleaded.

The gap between the second and third pillar was a little wider, but Serena was able to cross it. Her feet nearly slipped, as the surface was very wet, like Clemont had stated.

"I will be the best trainer I can be for you, Oblivicorn! But I can't do that if you don't let me!" Serena said. She then averted Oblivicorn's gaze.

Serena dared to look at Oblivicorn. The mare was there, looking at Serena intently. The honey blonde wondered if the Dark Horse Pokemon had chosen to stop at this location to put her through a trial or sorts.

If that was the case, Serena was going to do everything in her hand to pass it.

"So, what do you say, Oblivicorn?" Serena asked.

Oblivicorn didn't reply. So the honey blonde jumped towards the next pillar.

"AH!"

However, just as she landed, her feet slipped, making her lose her balance and pummel to the torrential river down below.

"DELPH!"

"SERENA!"

"PIKAPI!"

"Splendifowl, grab Serena-"

"Quilladin, use Vine Whip-"

However, Serena didn't fall, and remained mid air. She noticed that something was grabbing her by the back of her shirt. Looking up, she saw that said something was Oblivicorn, standing on the top of the pillar while grabbing Serena with her mouth.

"Oblivicorn! You save-WHOA!" Serena was interrupted by Oblivicorn hauling over her with incredible force, making her land on her back.

The Dark and Fairy-type Pokemon then hopped from one pillar to the next until she reached the edge of the crack where Ash and the others were. Once safe, Serena dismounted her.

"Oblivicorn..." Serena said, her voice almost a whisper. "You... you saved me!"

Oblivicorn neighed softly, as she gently nuzzled Serena's face. The honey blonde smiled as she rubbed the mare's head. She could feel that whatever the Pokemon's hostility towards her was now gone. It was now or never.

"Ash, the PST, please," Serena requested. "I have the feeling it will be different this time."

Ash didn't say anything, and merely pulled the device out of his backpack, and handed it to Serena.

"Oblivicorn..." Serena said, as she moved the mic close to the equine. "Will you talk to me?"

This time, Oblivicorn didn't remain silent, and began to softly growl and snort into the mic.

[Serena I... I'm so sorry... now I see, I've been acting so stupid...] Oblivicorn began.

"It's okay, Oblivicorn. I'm not mad at you. In fact, I'm very happy to see that you're talking to me again," Serena replied, rubbing the equine's head. "Though, will you tell me why? Why were you acting that way? It is something I said? Something I did?"

Oblivicorn remained silent.

"Come on, please tell me. Don't be afraid," Serena prodded.

[It... it was when I evolved...] Oblivicorn began. [That other human girl was about to give you the stone of light, which I wanted so I could evolve, and you were so happy that I was going to evolve into Kiricorn...]

"Oh, Oblivicorn..."

[B-But then... Bonnie brought the stone of dark... and the moment I saw it... I don't know what came over me that compelled me to touch it and... I turned into what I am now,] Oblivicorn recounted.

"Oblivicorn... don't you like what you are now?" Serena asked.

Oblivicorn shook her head. [No. I didn't mind if I was a Kiricorn or an Oblivicorn. But I knew you wanted me to be a Kiricorn.]

"Oblivicorn, I would never force you to evolve one way or another. That decision would have been yours and yours only," Serena insisted. "I wanted you to be a Kiricorn. But if you wanted to be an Oblivicorn, I would have supported you as well."

[That's what I thought. But after I touched the stone of dark and evolved... it was then when I realized what I had done,] Oblivicorn continued. [Then I saw you, as you saw my new form for the first time... and you flinched.]

Serena gasped, as her jaw dropped. She recalled that moment, and realized that yes, her reaction had been one of surprise the first time she had seen Oblivicorn, mostly because she didn't even know she could evolve into something other than Kiricorn. And said new evolution had quite the imposing appearance.

"Oh, Oblivicorn..." Serena said, hugging the Dark Horse Pokemon's head. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry! I was so insensitive back then... no wonder you hated me..."

[I never hated you,] Oblivicorn said, much to Serena's surprise. [No matter how much I wanted to, I couldn't bring myself to hate you.]

"But then, why did you act like a jerk towards Serena?" Bonnie asked, crossing her arms. "She was nothing but nice to you!"

[You are right. I was afraid that by evolving into what I am now, I had disappointed Serena, and sooner or later, she would reject me,]

Oblivicorn admitted. [So I thought it would be less painful if it was me who rejected her first.]

"Oblivicorn, I would never reject you no matter what you are..."
Serena said.

[I know that now. I think deep down, I knew it all along. That's why I tried to run away. But no matter how many times I rebuffed you, I acted hostile, or even tried to run away, you never gave up on me,] Oblivicorn said, and Serena couldn't help but feel a little pride over her perseverance bearing fruit. [You even risked your life to get me back. And when you almost fell from that rock...]

"That's when you realized that Serena was sincere, right?" Ash ventured to ask.

[Deep down, I already knew that. No, that's when I finally realized what a big mistake I have made. That no matter what, I loved Serena, and now I was going to lose her forever because of my stupidity,] Oblivicorn said, the sorrow in her voice being amazingly replicated through the PST. [Thankfully I was fast enough to catch you.]

"That's something I will never forget, Oblivicorn. Thank you," Serena said, rubbing the equine's forehead.

[You were in danger because of me, so there's nothing to thank me for,] Oblivicorn said. [Now Serena... even if I know I don't deserve it, will you forgive me? I've been acting like a fool this whole time, and you almost lost your life because of it.]

Serena smiled sweetly at the Dark and Fairy-type. "Only if you forgive me for reacting the way I did when you evolved."

Oblivicorn nodded. Serena hugged her Pokemon, as a feeling of relief over the fact that she and Oblivicorn had finally been able to reconcile washed over her body. After breaking the hug, Serena took

the pokeball still attached to Clemont's device and recalled the Dark Horse Pokemon.

"Welcome back, Oblivicorn. We all missed you." she said to the pokeball in her hand. After putting it away, she turned towards the rest of the group. "So, should we go back? I think we spent enough time here."

"Agreed. I'm super glad that Serena and Oblivicorn patched things up, but whenever we're in a cave for long something awful happens, so we should leave quickly," Bonnie said.

No one objected to that, and the group turned back and headed towards the entrance. Once out of the cave, they would take the ferry that would bring them to the next destination in their journey, Silverport Town.

...

Silverport Town

Sometime before Ash and his friends traversed the Labyrinth in order to find Oblivicorn, in Silverport Town a contest was about to reach its climax, with a Cocancer and a Espeon fighting in the final match, with the Espeon trainer having a little over half his initial points, and his opponent only having one third left.

"Come on Espeon, we're almost there! Psybeam!" Espeon's trainer, a black haired boy, commanded.

"Take it, Cocancer!" Cocancer's trainer, a brown skinned girl with dreadlocks, said.

"A bold move from Leona! Is Cocancer's lack of speed the reason behind such a decision, or is she planning something else?" Jillian commented.

Espeon's forehead jewel began to glow with the colors of the rainbow, before firing a beam of psychic power of swirling colors which smashed against Cocancer. The Beach Pokemon growled in pain as Leona's points dropped to just one fourth, but it held on.

"Now, Grass Knot!" Leona ordered.

As it was enduring the Psychic-type move, Cocancer's eyes glowed green as it slammed one of its pincers into the ground. The very next second, several roots burst from under Espeon, wrapping around it and leaving the Sun Pokemon immobilized.

"And Leona traps the opponent with a clever tactic!" Jillian excitedly observed, just as Espeon's trainer's points dropped, though they were still above Leona's. "Though Travis is still in the lead, and there's less than one minute left! What will Leona do now?"

"How about this?" the Alolan girl asked, grinning widely as she showed her Z-Ring, a green crystal embedded on it. Leona quickly went through several poses, ending with a motion that involved spreading her arms outwards above her head. A bright green aura surrounded Leona's body, which was quickly transferred to Cocancer. "It's time, Cocancer! Bloom Doom!"

"Co, coca!" Cocancer cried before slamming both pincers into the ground, and the battlefield was quickly covered in grass and beautiful flowers of many colors.

Then, a mass of leaves and flower petals began to gather around the still trapped Espeon, encasing it inside a massive flower bud. As the bud blossomed, it exploded into a blast of yellow and green light.

"Espeon!" Travis cried.

When the move ended, Espeon was laying in the middle of a crater, its limbs sprawled and its eyes all swirly. A buzzing noise rang.

"Espeon is unable to battle! That means that the winner of this match is Cocancer! And thus, Leona is the winner of the Silverport Town Contest!" Jillian declared, and the public went wild.

...

Half an hour later, Leona, changed from her contest outfit to her usual clothes (though with a jacket thrown it, Silverport was way too cold to wear a top that left her arms and shoulders bare), left the Contest Hall as she headed towards the Pokemon Center. Now that the contest was over she had nothing to do there, but it was too late to go somewhere else, meaning that she would have to spend another night here. Oh well, it wasn't like she and her Pokemon couldn't use the rest so they could resume their journey completely refreshed.

As she walked through the empty streets of Silverport Town - it was a bit late, and the evenings in that place proved to be cold - she opened her case with five ribbons on it, which would secure her a spot in the coming Grand Festival.

"Well, there have been some bumps in the road, but I finally did it," the Alolan girl said, admiring her five ribbons. "Now to the Pokemon Center, and tomorrow I'll take a ferry back to Venesi, and train like crazy until the Grand Festival!"

"Excuse me, miss!" a male voice said.

Leona stopped and looked in the direction of the voice, and saw a brown haired boy, maybe a year or two older than her, running towards her with a pain expression.

"Oh, hello!" Leona said, quickly taking notice of the young man's distress. "You look troubled. Do you need help with something?"

"Yes, yes I do!" the boy answered, almost in a pleading tone. "I-I was training with my Pokemon on Route 16, to the north of here, and he fell down a crack near the base of the mountain, and it can't climb

back! You're a trainer, don't you? I'm sure one of your Pokemon can help it come out!"

"Oh my goodness, that's horrible!" Leona gasped, covering her mouth with her hands. "Of course I will help you! Lead me to the place!"

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" the boy said, as he ran towards the north of the town. "My name's Maury, by the way."

"Leona," the Alola native replied. "And don't worry, your Pokemon will be safe and sound in a jiffy!"

...

A few moments later, Leona and Maury had left Silverport Town and were walking through Route 16, which surrounded the base of Mount Lanthanite and was the only path that took to Snowbank Town. The route was mostly a gray rocky path surrounded by many steep cliffs and very little in the way of vegetation, making it one of Tandor's most desolate routes.

"So, where is your Pokemon?" Leona asked. "We've been walking for quite some time..."

"Don't worry, we're close!" Maury assured, before suddenly running and disappearing behind a corner. "Over here!"

"Wait a minute, not so fast!" Leona said, as she tried to keep up with him. "I know that you're worried for your Pokemon, but I can't run as fast as you!"

However, upon turning the corner, she saw no one. She looked around, rather worried. "Maury?"

"Over here! Come on, don't fall behind!" Maury's voice echoed, but she was unable to track where it came from.

"I said don't go so fast! Where are you?" Leona asked as she ran towards the place she believed Maury was, but once again no one was there. "Maury? Come on, this isn't funny!" she protested, as she looked around. "Great. I don't even know where I am. How am I supposed to find my way back to Silverport...?"

"Are you lost, missy?" a voice said in a mocking tone from above.

"We can help you find your way back," a second voice said. "For a price, that's it."

Looking upwards, Leona saw two people standing on a cliff at each side of her, wearing strange dark blue uniforms with armored parts, face-concealing helmets with a green horizontal visor, and a green Omega symbol on their chests.

"You... you guys are Team Omega!" Leona said, taking a step back.

"Bingo," a third voice said from behind. Leona turned around and saw a third Team Omega member cutting her way. This one was much bigger, and his uniform was more heavily armored, his helmet having a Y-shaped visor instead.. "And if you're smart, you'll give us your Pokemon and that pretty bracelet of yours without making a fuss."

"Like hell I'm going to give you my Pokemon or my Z-ring!" Leona said, two pokeballs already in hand. "Golem, Vaporeon, teach these guys a lesson!"

The pokeballs opened upon hitting the ground, releasing the Megaton and Bubble Jet Pokemon, who took fighting stances.

"I was hoping you'd say that," the third Team Omega member, who looked to be the leader, said with a chuckle. "Come on guys, show this little girl how out of her depth she is!"

"Yes, Captain Darren!" the two grunts said at once.

"Go, Gliscor!"

"Come out, Tofurang!"

Leona's eyes widened upon seeing the Pokemon the Team Omega members had sent: unlike the usual Gliscor and Tofurang, these Pokemon were dark blue with some parts bright green, with an aura of the same color glowing around them, as well as red glowing eyes. They were also wearing high-tech looking collars on their necks with an Omega symbol on them.

"W-What the...? Nuclear Pokemon!" Leona stammered in shock.

"Surprised, little girl?" one of the grunts said in a mocking tone.

"N-Not at all!" she said, trying to put on a brave face. "I have already faced this kind of Pokemon before, and I can beat them again! Golem, Thunderbolt! Vaporeon, Bubblebeam!"

And thus, Leona's Pokemon engaged Team Omega's Pokemon in combat. She made sure that her Pokemon wouldn't take any unnecessary hits, since Nuclear Pokemon had a frightening attacking power, but were very fragile. Keeping her head cool and directing her Pokemon as best as she could, Golem and Vaporeon were on the road to victory.

"Pajay, Nuclear Wind!"

Before Leona had time to react, her Pokemon were swept away by a tornado of green mist blown by a Pajay that wasn't there a couple seconds ago. When did that guy send his Pokemon? While the attack wasn't enough to knock her Pokemon out, it did create a window of opportunity for Gliscor and Tofurang to do so.

"Hey! What the hell!?" Leona protested.

"What, did you expect us to play fair or something?" the Omega Captain chuckled. "This ain't a league match, girlie."

"Oh, well, in that case, come out everyone!" Leona shouted, sending her other four Pokemon into battle.

"That's more like it!" the Captain said, weirdly excited. "I love to fight against an enemy that doesn't hold back! Go Gyarados, destroy!"

Leona's blood froze upon seeing the nuclear Atrocious Pokemon materialize in front of her, its terrifying presence already eroding her Pokemon's resolve.

Needless to say, the battle didn't go in Leona's favor. The Gyarados and the Pajay proved to be very powerful opponents, able to hold their own against Leona's team. And just like they did before, the grunts' Pokemon took any opportunity to land a cheap shot and knock out one of her Pokemon. One by one, all of Leona's Pokemon fell prey to the Nuclear monsters.

This wasn't a battle she could win. So there was only one thing she could do now.

"Jerbolta, quickly! Run away and seek help!" Leona pleaded.

"J-Jer?" Jerbolta asked just as he dodged an Aqua Tail from Gyarados, clearly unwilling to abandon her trainer.

"Do it, Jerbolta!" Leona pleaded, just as Decidueye was knocked out by a powerful Air Slash from Pajay. The Alolan girl could hear the two Omega grunts stomping towards her. "Come on Jerbolta, just leave already! You're my only hope!"

"Jer, jerbolta!" Jerbolta cried, tears welling in its eyes, before the shiny Pokemon blitzed away.

"Don't let that Pokemon escape!"

Those were the last words Leona heard before something hard hit her head, and she saw nothing but darkness...

Author's Note: And at last, Serena finally found what was the problem with Oblivicorn, and they were able to reach an understanding and repair their broken bond! Yay! I hope you liked this little plotline, and if you didn't, well, I hope you're happy it's finally over.

In the meantime, Ash and Clemont made some progress in their training, at least when it comes to Mega Evolution, as they were able to mega evolve Archilles and Electruxo without any issues. Regarding Greninja, well, it seems like Ash is still missing something before he can make a breakthrough.

Say hello, to Leona, who finally got her last ribbon after losing to Serena in Amaree. Unfortunately, her joy was short lived, given that she got the attention of Team Omega. Also, I'm pretty sure you can get an idea of what happened to Alain and Mairin after they followed Maury somewhere else.

Thanks a lot to TheDoctor1998, MegaSalamence64, Fox McCloud, Brightnova169, Hirowriter and MarcusDarkus87 for reviewing the last chapter, and special thanks to Viroro-kun for beta-reading this chapter, whose edits and suggestion made it so much better.

Next chapter, the Team Omega arc begins! Oh boy, I've been so eager to finally get to that one, since it's one of the most action-packed arcs of the entire story. In the meantime, don't forget to leave a review with your thoughts on this chapter. See ya!

Omegageddon, Part I

Chapter 50:

Omegaggedon, Part I

Silverport Town

"Good morning everyone!" Serena said as she entered the Pokemon Cafeteria, and sat next to Ash and in front of Clemont and Bonnie.

"Good morning," Ash replied, the two of them sharing a quick kiss on the lips. "I see somebody sleep really well today!"

"Yeah. You usually don't sleep in as much," Clemont observed.
"Especially since we went to bed early yesternight."

After their detour on the Labyrinth, the group took the very last ferry of the day, and they arrived at Silverport Town at night. As usual, a sign was there to welcome them:

Welcome to Silverport Town

A fresh sea breeze brings new promise!

Feeling exhausted, especially Serena, they decided to just get to the Pokemon Center, leave their Pokemon under Nurse Joy's care, have a quick dinner and head to bed early.

"What can I say? I slept so well tonight!" Serena beamed, as she stretched her arms above her head. "I don't remember the last time I had such a nice sleep. The perks of no longer being worried about what you are going to do with your rebellious Pokemon."

"Yeah, when my Charizard finally stopped disobeying me I also slept a little better," Ash replied. "It feels good, isn't it? Like you make such a huge breakthrough as a trainer."

"You have no idea how right you are, Ash," Serena said, before directing her gaze at the Lumiose siblings in front of her. "Say, since yesterday's training was cut short, how about if we spend the day in this town and resume our training? We still have a lot of time until the Grand Festival, and from what I saw Snowbank Town isn't that far away from here."

"Oh, sure, *training*, that's what you call it now?" Bonnie asked teasingly as her mouth curved into a taunting grin.

Serena, however, rolled her eyes. "Yes, I do plan to take the opportunity to go out with my *boyfriend*," sweet goodness, it felt so good referring to Ash with that word. "But when I said training, I mean it. I didn't have the chance to train Oblivicorn after she evolved, so we'll have a lot of catching up to do until she's at the same level as the rest of my team."

"Oblivicorn looks pretty strong. I'm sure she'll catch up in no time," Ash optimistically assured, making Serena smile.

Once they finished their breakfast, they headed towards the reception counter, where there were already several trays with pokeball, as well as Pikachu and Dedenne, waiting for them. As soon as they got close, Pikachu quickly jumped onto Ash's shoulder and Dedenne took his place inside Bonnie's bag, while the trainers took their pokeball.

As they were about to head to the currently empty battleground just outside the Pokemon Center, a pair of teens walked through the doors.

"Aw man, I thought I almost had it this time!" one of the teens, a blond boy, complained.

"Well, better luck next time," his companion, a girl with black hair styled on a long braid, replied. "Hopefully I will catch it myself the next time we see it."

"That's if nobody else catches it first," the boy replied. "Though, with so many people trying to catch it, I don't know why it is still around here."

"Maybe it's looking for a worthy trainer," the girl guessed.

"In that case you shouldn't even try, you're the suckiest trainer I know," the boy said with a teasing smirk.

"Says the one who failed three times in two days to catch it," the girl fired back.

The two of them disappeared behind the door that led to the cafeteria, leaving Ash and his friends pondering what they were talking about.

"I see people are still failing to catch that Jerbolta," Nurse Joy commented.

"Huh? A Jerbolta?" Clemont repeated.

"Yes, but not just a normal Jerbolta, but a shiny one. Naturally, such rare Pokemon are sought out by many trainers. It arrived a few days ago and has been hanging around the town's outskirts for some time," Nurse Joy added. "Unsurprisingly, a lot of trainers tried to catch it, but it always managed to evade them and run away. Though he always returns to the town for some reason." She looked pensive as she put a finger under her chin. "Honestly, I wonder where it came from. Jerbolta aren't native to this area, so it has to be from a trainer. Maybe it's looking for its trainer, but he or she doesn't seem to be here anymore."

"A shiny Jerbolta," Clemont repeated, as he shot his friends a worried look, while Serena pulled out her tablet and began to tap at the screen. "Do you think it may be... Leona's?"

"Well, shiny Pokemon are rare, but I'm sure that there are more shiny Jerbolta out there," Ash reasoned. "Leona didn't strike me as

the kind of trainer who would abandon her Pokemon like that."

"Guys, there was a contest in this town three days ago," Serena said, as she held her tablet facing the others so they could see the screen. "Look who was the winner."

There was a picture of a smiling Leona lifting a ribbon above her head, with all her Pokemon around her, Jerbolta included.

"So... it may be hers," Bonnie said, sharing her brother's worry. "Then why is it still around this town? Did something happen to Leona?"

"Only one way to find out," Ash decided. "Let's go find that Jerbolta and ask it directly," he looked at Serena. "Hopefully it will remember you and won't try to run away."

Everybody nodded as they followed Ash outside the Pokemon Center.

...

Moments later, the group was outside the center, Luxray, out of his pokeball in order to help with the search.

Hopefully, it wouldn't take too long to find the unusually colored rodent. While certainly not a small town, Silverport Town was still not particularly big. It was built at the edge of the slopes of Mt. Lantanite, surrounded by trees and snow.

"Lu, luxray!"

And as expected, Luxray managed to track the Pokemon in question pretty quickly, leading the group to one of the houses at the northernmost edge of the town, where Jerbolta was hiding behind a pile of firewood.

"J-Jer!" Jerbolta cried upon seeing the group of humans running towards it, ready to flee.

"Wait, Jerbolta!" Ash called.

"Pi, pikachu!" Pikachu called as well.

"Jerbolta, don't you remember me? I was a friend of Leona!" Serena said, hoping to make the Sand Mouse Pokemon remember. "You fought against my Pancham on that ship!"

"Bolta?" Jerbolta asked and stopped as it heard Leona's name. "Jer, jerb?"

"Yes, we're Leona's friends," Serena repeated. She then turned towards Ash. "Ash, the PST, quickly!"

The raven haired teen nodded, and quickly pulled the translating device out of his backpack.

"Jerbolta, you have nothing to be afraid of, we aren't going to try to catch you," Serena assured the shaken Electric and Ground-type. "What happened? Why are you here all alone? Where is Leona?"

"Jer, jerb, bolta!" Jerbolta began. [My trainer and the others! They were kidnapped by evil humans! We tried to fight against them, but the horrible monsters they sent against us were too strong!]

There was a collective gasp upon hearing Jerbolta's words. Leona, kidnapped? Who could have done that?

"Evil humans? What kind of evil humans?" Clemont asked.

"Jer... jerbo, jer, bol," Jerbolta replied. [They... they were dressed in a strange way, I couldn't see their faces... oh! I remember there was this symbol drawn on their chests!]

Jerbolta then drew an Omega symbol on the ground with its hand.

"Team Omega," Ash darkly said, clenching a fist. "It's always them. At this point I shouldn't be surprised."

"Bolta, jerbol, jerb!" Jerbolta continued. [She told me to run and ask for help, but I was unable to... anytime I got close to this place, a human tried to catch me! Oh, thank goodness I found you! Please tell me you'll help me find her!]

"Of course. You don't even need to ask," Ash said, his voice full of resolve.

"Uh, Jerbolta, what do you mean by 'horrible monsters'?" Bonnie asked, bringing attention to a detail others had not paid attention to in the wake of the kidnapping. "Didn't they just use normal Pokemon against you?"

"Bolta, bol, jerbolta!" Jerbolta cried, agitated, as if the memory of the battle caused him distress. [They were Pokemon, yes, but not like me or Pikachu or Luxray. They were... they were wrong, twisted...]

"That... sounds like Nuclear Pokemon," Clemont said after weighing those words. "Team Omega managed to capture a lot of them during the attack on Bealbeach City, but how were they able to tame them...?"

"It doesn't matter. What matters now is finding Leona and rescuing her from the hands of those criminals," Ash stated.

"Yes, but, how are we going to find her?" Serena asked, worried. "Even if they have a base around these parts, it wouldn't be out in the open. Remember how well hidden their base was in Kevlar? And we had the help of Pokemon who had escaped from such a place in order to locate it. We don't have such a thing now."

"Hmmm..." Clemont hummed, his arms crossed and his expression focused. "I think I have an idea that may work. Jerbolta, can you take us to the place where Leona was attacked."

The Sand Mouse Pokemon nodded.

...

Twenty minutes later, Jerbolta had led the group out of Silverport Town and into Route 16, surrounding Mount Lanthanite, on a place surrounded by short cliffs that, according to Jerbolta, was where Leona was attacked by the Team Omega grunts that used Nuclear Pokemon. The place had several craters, cracks and burnt marks spread around it, signs that there had been a battle not too long ago.

"So, here we are," Ash said, looking around at the rocky and barren scenery. "What are we looking for?"

"Do you think the attackers left visible tracks when they returned to their base?" Serena asked.

Clemont shook his head. "The terrain here is too hard for actual footprints. However, there's a different kind of footprint I can track and follow. Clemontic Gear on!"

From Clemont's backpack the Aipom Arm pulled the Hidden Clues Tracker and Analyzer, that device modeled after a Hoothoot that the inventor had used to find clues about the aliens that turned out to be Sheldon's S-51 harassing people on the Wheatfields.

The thought that said area was now an irradiated death zone full of vicious Nuclear Pokemon filled Serena with apprehension.

"What do you plan to do, Clemont?" Bonnie asked, this time not making some biting comment about her brother's inventions' propensity to explode. "How is that thing going to help?"

"Remember that the Hidden Clues Tracker and Analyzer is able to detect all kinds of radiation, nuclear included," Clemont said, switching the mechanical Hoothoot on. The device hummed to life, its red eyes glowing as it began to scan the area. "Even if it happened a few days ago, I'm sure there are still traces of nuclear radiation left by the presence of Nuclear Pokemon, as well as potential Nuclear-type attacks used."

"That sounds nice, but how is that going to help us find Leona?" Ash asked a little impatiently.

"I will get to that right now!" Clemont assured him. The mechanical Hoothoot dinged. "Aha! Just like I have predicted, there are still some radioactive residues in the area. Weak, but enough for what I want to do," Clemont said, as he began to fiddle with the device's controls. "Now, as far as we know, there are no wild Nuclear Pokemon in East Tandor, right?"

"As far as I know, no," Serena replied. "There's only one power plant on this side of the region, and is to the south of Venesi City. And that plant never suffered any accident that may result in Nuclear Pokemon."

"Exactly! Meaning that, if we scan the area for more radiation that matches the one found here..."

"We will find the hideout of the kidnappers!" Ash said in realization, his mood considerably improving. "Science is so amazing, and so are you, Clemont!"

"Hehe, thanks!" Clemont bashfully took the compliment. The mechanical Hoothoot beeped again. "And look at that, we have a coincidence! There is a source of radiation that's almost identical to those emitted by Nuclear Pokemon two kilometers and three hundred meters to the east along the coast!"

"Awesome! Lead the way, Clemont!" Ash eagerly said.

...

After more walking, they reached the area where the signal allegedly came from. And indeed, there was a plain looking building near a cliff, about two stories tall with opaque glass windows and a few satellite dishes on its roof, making it look like some kind of laboratory or research center. The building was surrounded by a tall wire fence.

"So, that's where the signal comes from, huh?" Ash asked.

"Doesn't look like a Team Omega base," Bonnie observed. "And it's out in the open."

"I disagree. It may not be hidden like the other lair, but it's both discreet-looking, far from towns or cities, and heavily guarded. Looks like the perfect hideout to me," Ash replied.

"There's one way to see if that's the place we're looking for or not," Clemont said, a pokeball in hand. "Luxray, come out!"

The capture device opened, sending Clemont's pure Electric-type Pokemon.

"Lu, luxray!" Luxray cried upon materializing.

"Luxray, see that place over there?" Clemont pointed at the apparent research building. "Can you use your X-ray vision to see what's inside?"

"Luxray!" The Gleam Eyes Pokemon nodded in affirmation, before staring at the building in question.

His eyes began to glow red as he scanned it, while Ash took out once again the PST in order to translate. After a few minutes of scanning, Luxray had his answer. "Lu, ray, lux, ray-lu!" Luxray said. [That building is much bigger on the inside than it appears, as it extends deep into the ground. It's also crawling with the same kind of uniformed criminals we fought on that sunny city some months ago.]

The revelation was met by a collective gasp from everybody else.

"So, they have another base here," Ash said, as he opened his Pokegear. "I'm going to send a message to the Rangers so they come and raid this place."

"Wait, what about Leona?" Serena asked, as she showed Luxray the picture of Leona after winning the Silverport Town Contest on her

tablet. "Can you see if a girl that matches this description is there?"

"Jer, jerbo!" Jerbolta agreed, bobbing its head.

Luxray hummed something, and went back to scan the building.

A few minutes later, he spoke. "Luxra, ray, luxra!" Luxray cried. [Yes, the girl in the picture is inside, locked inside a cell. Not just that, but I also found two humans who are friend of yours, Alain and Mairin, locked as well.]

"A-Alain and Mairin are also there!?" Ash almost shouted. "No wonder Sycamore couldn't get them to pick up their holocasters!"

"Alain is an exceptional trainer. How did Team Omega manage to capture him like that?" Serena asked.

"Maybe they kidnapped him and Mairin where they were sleeping, or they were led to a trap." Clemont guessed. "Though that's not important now. We need to decide what we are going to do until the Rangers show up."

That moment, Ash's pokegear pinged. The raven haired teen looked at the screen and frowned. "The Rangers have answered."

"That doesn't look like it's good news, does it?" Bonnie asked.

"No. It says that with all the troubles on West Tandor with the power plant meltdowns and the Nuclear Pokemon, they had to send a lot of Rangers to the west part of the region as reinforcements, and lack the numbers to come here and raid this place. They're trying to recall as many Rangers as possible, but they don't know how long it's going to take," Ash told the others. "They also told us not to do anything dangerous or risky."

"Je, jerbolta!" Jerbolta desperately pleaded. [But, but, we can't leave Leona there! We have to save her!]

"And we will," Ash firmly stated, as he glared at the fenced building.

"My common sense tells me that we should just wait and let the Rangers handle this, but I can't stand the thought of leaving Leona, Alain and Mairin to their luck," Serena said, grasping her blue ribbon.

"We don't need to shut down the base or anything. Just get in, release Alain, Mairin and Leona, and get out," Ash said in a way that made the plan sound way more simple than it was. "Then we let the Rangers do the rest."

"First we need to find a way to enter that place," Clemont said. "I have the feeling that their security will be far tighter than a mere wire fence."

"Aside from the entrance we used to get in, the Team Omega base near Kevlar Town also had a back door that they used to send and receive cargo. I'm sure they have something like that here as well," Ash told them.

"Luxray, have you seen such a 'back door' when you scanned the building?" Clemont asked.

"Lu, Luxray, ray, lux," Luxray cried while nodding, much to their relief. [Yes, but said entrance is at the very bottom of the cliff. It is only accessible either through sea or by air.]

"An underground port. Makes sense, given that Team Omega has a submarine," Clemont stated. "So... how are we going to get down there?"

Ash merely smirked.

...

Ash imagined that most Team Omega members assigned to watch the port that day believed that their day would be dull and uneventful. Of course, said belief would have been shattered with extreme prejudice the moment two dragon Pokemon barged into the place, the entrance to the port being thankfully big enough to that neither

Dunseraph nor Coatlith needed to dive underwater, probably because they wanted the port to be accessible not only by the submarine, but normal boats as well.

Needless to say, the Team Omega grunts present weren't expecting an attack coming from such a place.

"Eh?" one grunt asked.

"What the...?" another said.

"Dunseraph, Dragon Pulse!" Ash commanded.

"Coatlith, Dragon Rage!" Serena followed.

Both dragons took a deep breath and released a stream of dragon-shaped, purple and amethyst energy and a torrent of swirling flames of similar colors, forcing the grunts to scatter around the area.

"We're under attack! Defend yourselves!" a grunt said, the first one to snap out of the shock, two pokeballs in hand. "Go Gargryph and Tofurang!"

"Go, Nimflora!" another one said.

"Come out, Dearewl and Cometeor!" others followed.

"Attack, Floatzel!" a fourth one said, with more following, and soon the port was filled with all sorts of Pokemon.

"Attention, there are intruders in the port! It's... Ash Ketchum and his friends!" A grunt said, while tapping his helmet. "Send reinforcements, quickly!"

"Drats, they alerted the rest of the base!" Bonnie complained, as she, Serena and Jerbolta hopped off of Coatlith.

"We knew it was going to happen," Serena said, pokeball in hand. "Delphox, go!"

"If we can get to a control room quickly enough, not only I'll be able to find where Alain, Mairin and Leona are, but I'm sure I'll get a lot of information on both this base and Team Omega as whole!" Clemont said, taking a pair of pokeballs out. "Go Luxray and Nucleon!"

The battle began, and as with most other times they had faced Team Omega grunts in battle, it went in Ash and his friend's favor.

Delphox blasted with Flamethrower a pair of incoming Gligar, while Coatlich smacked with Drill Peck a Tanscure that had tried to bite her.

Luxray, coated in electricity, smashed against a group of Trawpint, Primeape and Felunge, taking them down like a bowling ball scoring a strike, while Nucleon protected his partner from an Eshouten diving from above with Gamma Ray.

Even Bonnie was battling, commanding Jerbolta - the Sand Mouse Pokemon was desperate enough to rescue its trainer in order to follow the commands of a practical stranger as long as they aligned with its goal - into bombarding the enemy Pokemon with Electro Ball, with Dedenne helping with a few Thundershocks.

As the battle progressed, the Pokemon fighting for the Team Omega grunts were knocked out over time, and were recalled before their trainers fled. However, the first batch of reinforcements arrived, and sent more Pokemon to replace those they had been defeated by.

"Guys, we can't let them stall us here," Ash began. "You guys get into the base and find that control room so Clemont can do his thing! I'll stay here and keep them busy!"

"I know you're strong Ash, but will you be okay being alone against so many enemies?" Serena asked, a little worried.

"You've seen that these guys aren't much of a threat. Now go! Archilles, I choose you!" Ash said, sending a second Pokemon to help Dunseraph. "Archilles, Dunseraph, use Flamethrower and Ancient Power in order to cover Serena, Clemont and Bonnie!"

"Arch!"

"Seraph!"

As Ash's friends ran towards one of the two doors that led to the rest of the base, Archilles breathed a stream of flames while Dunseraph launched golden boulders at whoever tried to get in their way. Soon, they crossed the door, disappearing from Ash's sight.

"Alright guys, let's finish this up quickly so we can rejoin the others!" Ash told his Pokemon.

"Pi-pika!"

"Chilles!"

"Dunse!"

"Everybody, go stop the other intruders!" a new male voice ordered. "I will take care of Ketchum!"

Looking in the direction of the voice, Ash saw Zebos, the Team Omega captain he had fought on the base north of Kevlar, what it felt like a lifetime ago. He was followed by another Team Omega grunt shorter than him.

"Yes sir!" the grunts said at once, wasting no time to recall their Pokemon and going after Ash's friends. Some looked relieved, no wonder because they believed that dealing with Serena and Clemont would be easier than Ash.

Oh well, better let his friends show these people how wrong that line of thinking is.

"Well, well, look who decided to drop by," Zebos cackled as he walked towards Ash. "You didn't learn your lesson the last time you showed up to one of our bases uninvited, did you?"

"What are you talking about? The last time we fought you ran away with the tail between your legs," Ash fired back.

"Pika!" Pikachu agreed.

The bald man scowled. "Because you had the luck of those bikers showing up to get you out of the mess you were in. If it weren't for their interruption, things would have gone very differently. In fact, you didn't even fight me alone, you had the biker head honcho helping you. Had it been a fair fight, I would have crushed you!"

"That's rich, a criminal talking about fighting fair," Ash retorted. "I'm pretty sure you managed to kidnap Alain by 'fighting fairly' against him and Mairin, didn't you?" Ash said, narrowing his eyes at the Team Omega captain. "Because I know Alain, and he would have wiped the floor with any of your despicable lot."

"You better watch your mouth, you dumb hick!" the grunt snapped at Ash.

His voice was familiar, but Ash was unable to recall when he had heard such a voice. "Your voice rings a bell. Have we met before?"

"Have we met- for goodness' sake, is your brain so tiny you forgot about me already?!" the grunt said, removing his helmet, revealing to be a brown haired boy the same age as him. "You and your little girlfriend stole that Selkid from me!"

That piece of information jogged Ash's brain into remembering the grunt's identity. "... Maury?"

"Bingo," Maury said, his voice full of venom, as he put the helmet back on. "And now I'm getting a second chance to fix my mistake. Your girlfriend still has that Selkid, doesn't she? I'm taking it back, plus every other Pokemon you have as an added interest."

"Why don't you try then?" Ash said, spreading his arms in a taunting manner. "After all, I'm all alone here and no one is coming to help

me. I should be easy pickings."

"Oh, you're going to regret those words, brat! Go, Lucario!" Zebos said.

"You too, Lucario!" Maury added.

As father and son threw their pokeballs, the two Aura Pokemon materialized in front of them. They would be impossible to tell apart if it wasn't for the collar Zebos' Lucario was wearing, with a Mega Stone embedded on it. There were no signs of performance-enhancing gadgets this time around. It seemed that after the Muscular Enhancer became the catalyst of their defeats, they learned their lesson.

" *So, Maury's Riolu evolved. And Zebos got a replacement for the Muscular Enhancer,*" Ash said, taking notice of the enemy Pokemon.

"Lucario, Aura Sphere on Archilles!" Zebos ordered.

"Water Pulse, also on Archilles!" Maury followed.

"Lu, cario!" the two Lucario cried at once.

The two Lucario brought their paws together and formed two spheres of blue light; one of pure aura, the other of swirling water, before throwing both of them at the Fire Raptor Pokemon.

"Counter with Flamethrower, and Dunseraph, join in with Dragon Pulse!" Ash ordered.

"Ar, arch!" Archilles growled, as he opened his jaws, letting a torrent of flames pour from them.

"Dun-SE!" Dunseraph cried, sending a dragon-shaped purple and amethyst energy blast.

The four attacks converged in the middle, resulting in an explosion that made the port shake, followed by a cloud of smoke.

"Now, Flame Impact and Sky Fall!" Ash ordered.

The fire on Archilles's body parts roared and spread in order to encompass all of his body in a fiery cloak, while pressurized air swirled all around Dunseraph. The two Pokemon then launched themselves forward, parting the cloud of smoke in two, before slamming into the two Lucario, who were unable to dodge the attacks and were blasted backwards.

"Lucario!" Maury cried.

"Come on, get up!" Zebos yelled, as both Aura Pokemon jumped to their feet. "And use Bone Rush on Archilles!"

"Archilles, parry it with Dragon Claw! And Dunseraph, Dragon Pulse one more time!" Ash said.

"Not so fast! Lucario, protect dad's Lucario with another Dragon Pulse!" Maury ordered.

Zebos' Lucario generated a bone-shaped staff of green energy and dashed towards Archilles, who raised his arms, covered in a vibrant glowing green claw-shaped aura. As Lucario and Archilles traded blows and parries with their generated weapon and empowered limbs, respectively, Dunseraph breathed another dragon-shaped stream of energy, which was countered by an identical attack.

"Now, Lucario, Water Pulse on Archilles!" Maury ordered.

"Dodge it with Flame Impact! And Dunseraph, Sky Fall!" Ash countered.

"We won't let you! Lucario, Rock Slide over the two of them!" Zebos ordered.

Maury's Lucario formed between its paws yet another sphere of swirling blue water before launching it at Archilles, The Fire Raptor Pokemon, however, coated himself in a cloak of flames, dramatically

increasing his speed, and blitzed towards the Aura Pokemon while dodging the Water-type attack just as Dunseraph flew above him in the same direction, cloaked in pressurized air. Unfortunately for them, Zebos' Lucario summoned a rain of boulders above them.

"Dodge them, quickly!" Ash ordered.

Thanks to its enhanced speed, Archilles was able to zigzag around the area in order to dodge the falling rocks, but Dunseraph, with his huge size and slower speed wasn't so lucky, and several rocks smashed against his body.

"SEEEEEEEE... !" the angelic dragon cried in pain.

"Dunseraph! Hold on!" Ash pleaded.

"Finish that snake off with Ice Punch, Lucario!" Zebos ordered.

"Cario!" Lucario cried in agreement, clenching its paw into a fist which was quickly covered in a freezing aura. The bipedal canine leapt at Dunseraph, ready to smash its cold fist into him.

"Archilles, Flamethrower!" Ash ordered. "Dunseraph, Ancient Power on the other Lucario!"

"No!" Zebos cried.

Dunseraph followed the order, summoning a ring of spinning golden rocks around him, before launching them at Maury's Lucario. The Aura Pokemon crossed its arms in front of its face in a protective manner, the golden rocks smashing against it, causing little damage but preventing it from interfering.

Meanwhile, Zebos' Lucario was engulfed by a torrent of flames that came from Archilles' open jaws, blasting the Aura Pokemon away from Dunseraph, and landing in front of Zebos, its body covered in burns.

"Lucario!" Zebos snarled, before looking at his son. "Don't stay there bewildered like an idiot! Help me!"

"Y-Yes! Lucario, Heal Pulse!" Maury said.

Maury's Lucario thrust its palms towards its counterpart sending a pink energy wave. As the pink light washed over the senior Lucario, all its wounds quickly disappeared. Reinvigorated, Zebos' Pokemon jumped to its feet, ready to resume the fight.

"You're starting to get on my nerves, brat!" Zebos said, as he pulled out something from a compartment of his armor. Ash wasn't surprised to see it was a Keystone. "We're going to crush you with a force beyond your imagination! Lucario, Mega Evolve!"

Tendrils of light shot from both Keystone and Mega Stone, binding trainer and Pokemon. Lucario's body shone with a bright light as it transformed, acquiring a fiercer form. Once the transformation was complete, the helix of Mega Evolution flashed over it.

"You stand no chance against us now! Come on Lucario, Aura Sphere against Archilles!" Zebos ordered, throwing a hand forward.

"Luuuuu... !" The Mega evolved Pokemon began as it formed yet another orb of energy, this now substantially larger than the ones fired prior, before launching it forward. "CARIO!"

"Archilles, counter with Flamethrower!" Ash replied. "And Dunseraph-"

"Lucario, Dragon Pulse on Dunseraph, don't let him interfere!" Maury interrupted.

Ash gritted his teeth. "Dunseraph, counter with Ancient Power!"

Archilles took a deep breath and released a massive stream of flames towards the coming sphere of destruction, while Dunseraph

summoned yet another ring of spinning golden rocks and launched them at the incoming dragon-shaped energy blast.

Unfortunately for Ash, while Dunseraph was able to stop the Dragon Pulse - and the additional effect triggered, making Dunseraph overall stronger - the empowered Aura Sphere tore through the Flamethrower until it reached the fire dinosaur, exploding in its face and launching him backwards, smashing against a pile of small crates.

"Archilles!" Ash cried.

"Don't give him time to breathe! Lucario, Meteor Mash!" Maury ordered.

"Counter with Sky Fall, Dunseraph!" Ash replied.

The angelic dragon and bipedal canine launched at each other, the former covered in swirling currents of pressurized air, the latter glowing with a blue aura as its raised fist was shining brightly with a silvery light. The two Pokemon clashed in the middle, struggling against each other for a couple seconds, and after an explosion of compressed air Dunseraph won the struggle, launching Maury's Lucario backwards.

"Seraaaaaaaph!" he cried in victory.

"Archilles, are you okay?" Ash asked his seemingly downed Pokemon now that he had managed to win a little time to breathe.

"Chilles!" Archilles hissed as he emerged from under the pile of now broken crates, hurt but still ready to battle, piercing Mega Lucario with an intense glare.

"Good! Okay, it seems that Mega Evolved Lucario is going to be a problem," Ash said, holding his shuriken necklace. "So in that case, let's even the odds! Come on Archilles, let's do it TOGETHER!"

The process started again, tendrils of light shooting from Keystone and Mega Stone binding trainer and Pokemon, causing the latter to grow and change, the helix of Mega Evolution flashing briefly over Archilles as the process finished.

An artificial sun appeared close to the port's roof, illuminating everything and raising the temperature.

"What the- he can Mega Evolve his Pokemon too?" Maury asked, his voice cracking.

"So what? Our Pokemon are still better!" Zebos said, unimpressed. "Plus, this is good news! We can sell that Archilles alongside its Mega Stone as a package deal for a much bigger prize!"

"There's a saying where I come from, 'don't count your Pidgey before they hatch'," Ash told the greedy man. "Archilles, Flamethrower!"

Archilles took a deep breath and exhaled a massive torrent of flames towards the two Fighting and Steel-type Pokemon who looked understandably worried at the sheer magnitude of attack, which would make dodging it rather difficult.

"That's nothing for you, Lucario! Deflect it with Bone Rush!" Zebos ordered.

"And get behind, Lucario!" Maury followed.

Zebos' Lucario summoned yet another bone-shaped green staff of pure energy, this one noticeably larger and thicker, and spun it in front of it like a helix in order to disperse the incoming flames. Despite the maneuver being successful, the extreme heat the flames were radiating was causing Lucario to sweat.

"Now Dunseraph! Fly over it and use Dragon Pulse from above!" Ash commanded.

"Not so fast! Lucario, counter it with a Dragon Pulse of your own!" Maury ordered.

Two dragon-shaped energy beams flew towards each other from opposite directions, one a little bigger than the other. However, unlike the first time they clashed, the second time Dunseraph's attack overpowered Lucario's, and was able to hit the Mega Evolved Pokemon. Zebos' Lucario was unable to keep the Flamethrower at bay anymore, and the roaring flames washed over the Fighting and Steel-type, while Maury's Lucario jumped aside in order to avoid the raging inferno.

"NO!" Zebos cried.

"Lucario, quickly, heal dad's Lucario with Heal Pulse!" Maury quickly commanded.

"Intercept it with Flame Impact!" Ash replied just as quickly.

Just as the baseline Lucario was forming a pink energy aura between its paws, a cloak of flames spread over Archilles' body. The Mega Evolved Pokemon rocketed forward, leaving a trail of flames in his wake, getting between the two Lucario as Maury's fired the healing energy wave. However, rather than its partner, it was Archilles the Pokemon who was healed by the move.

"NO!" Maury shouted.

"You... you stupid kid!" Zebos shouted, a vein in his forehead pulsing with anger. Ash couldn't tell if he was talking to him or Maury. Not that he cared that much.

"Thanks for the cure. Now Archilles, Brick Break, followed by Flamethrower!" Ash commanded. "And Dunseraph, Sky Fall on the other Lucario!"

Archilles' tail glowed again with a white light, delivering a powerful swipe at Lucario's face and sending it tumbling backwards. He then

took a deep breath and released yet another torrent of flames before the Aura Pokemon could do anything. Meanwhile, Dunseraph, covered in a cloak of pressurized air, slammed into the Mega Evolved Lucario, who was barely able to stand on its feet, sending it flying next to its partner.

Neither Lucario was able to get up after those attacks, and Zebos' returned to its base form.

"N-No... ! This can't be happening!" Zebos shouted, grabbing the sides of his head with his hands.

"T-This guy is too strong! We need to fall back and ask for help!" Maury said, as he returned his defeated Lucario.

"Yes! There's no way he can defeat every trainer in this facility!" Zebos agreed, returning his Lucario, before he and his son turned back in order to run away.

"Arch!"

"Seraph!"

Unfortunately for them, Archilles and Dunseraph quickly intercepted them, blocking the way.

"You're crazy if you think I'm going to let you! Frosthra, I choose you!" Ash said, sending his Ice and Bug-type Pokemon. "Frosthra, bind them with String Shot!"

"Fro, frosthra!" The Frost Moth Pokemon buzzed in agreement, shooting a thread of sticky web that wrapped around Zebos and Maury's upper bodies, tying them together. He then fired a pair of additional blobs in order to seal their mouths off.

"Well done, Frosthra," Ash said, as he walked towards the now immobilized and silenced duo, and removed their earpiece and helmet, respectively. "This is to make sure you won't be able to call

for help. Now be good and stay put until the Rangers arrive and take you away."

"Mmmmmmmph! Mmmmmmmph!" both Zebos and Maury impotently protested, their yells muffled by the sticky thread gag.

Ash then looked at the angelic dragon hovering above them.
"Dunseraph, do you think you can carry these two to the Ranger Station we saw in Silverport Town?"

"Dun, dunse!" Dunseraph cried in affirmation, and before Ash could say any other word the God Snake Pokemon swooped in, grabbed the defeated Team Omega duo and flew out of the port's exit.

"That takes care of it," Ash said, as he returned his other Pokemon.
"Well done. Now, time to join with the others."

And with that, Ash left the port through the same gate his friends had crossed not that long ago.

...

As Ash fought against Zebos and Maury, Serena, Clemont and Bonnie fought their way through the hallways of the base against multiple Team Omega members, While individually they didn't pose much of a challenge, their numbers made up for it. Even then, it wasn't enough to slow down the determined teens.

"Delphox, Psybeam!"

The Fox Pokemon fired a multicolored beam of psychic power from her eyes, blasting a Firoke and a Lombre away.

"Luxray, Swift!"

The Gleam Eyes Pokemon released a barrage of golden stars that pelted a trio of Owten.

"Jerbolta, Electro Ball!"

The borrowed Sand Mouse Pokemon launched an electric sphere from the tip of its tail against a Palij, knocking it down.

"Shit, how can these kids be so strong!?" A female Team Omega grunt said, as she recalled her defeated Owten.

"They don't pay me enough for this!" a male grunt said, who ran away after recalling his knocked out Pokemon.

The rest of the grunts soon followed his example.

"Good job guys. Though, stay alert, I'm sure more enemies will show up soon," Serena warned the Pokemon.

"Del, delphox!"

"Ray!"

"Bolta!"

"So, where now, brother?" Bonnie asked.

"Let's try this room," Clemont said, pressing a switch that opened a sliding door. The inventor grinned. "Yes, at last!"

Upon peeking inside, Serena could see it was some kind of control room, with plenty of security monitors and a large computer terminal in the middle.

"This is weird. Shouldn't somebody here be taking care of this?" Serena asked, as she and Bonnie followed Clemont inside.

"Maybe there was somebody, but decided to leave their post and join the battle when the alarms went off," Clemont said, as he sat on the only chair and began working on the security terminal. "The Captains appear to be pretty efficient at their jobs from what I saw of them, but the grunts don't seem to be anywhere near as disciplined. Whoever was here didn't even bother to log off or put up any kind of security."

"Do you think you can find where Leona, Alain and Mairin are being kept?" Serena asked.

"I'm one hundred percent sure of it. But first..." Clemont plugged in an USB flash drive onto the terminal.

"What's that?" Bonnie asked.

"A little something I've been working for just in case we found ourselves inside another Team Omega base. With our luck, I knew it was only a matter of time," Clemont said, as a window appeared on the screen. Clemont's fingers danced over the keyboard with practiced ease. "It contains a computer virus of my own creation. It will copy every file they have on their servers and store them on my servers at the Prism Tower, while also sending a copy to the rangers. It can also disable all their firewalls and shut down any attempt at wiping out their servers clean."

"Wow," was all Serena could say. "No wonder you were spending so much time on your laptop whenever we had some spare time."

"And that's far from the only thing I've been working on in case we found ourselves in such a situation," Clemont said without taking his eyes away from the screen. "And I'm in! Alright, let's see... prisoner block... bingo! I found them! They're on the level right above us." Clemont hummed as he studied the map in front of him. "Getting there won't be easy, but unless we run into one of the captains, it should be doable."

"Can't you open their cells from here?" Serena suggested.

"I believe I could, but it wouldn't be any good," Clemont replied.

"Team Omega probably took their Pokemon away, and without them to fight they wouldn't go far before they're recaptured. Freeing them won't do any good until one of us is there with them."

That moment, the automatic door hissed open, causing the trio and their Pokemon to turn towards it, startled.

"Guys!"

Fortunately for them, it was Ash.

"Ash!" Serena said, beaming with joy. "You spooked us for a second there!"

"How did you know we were here?" Clemont asked.

"I had Pikachu track Dedenne's electrical signature," Ash replied, patting the electric rodent.

"Pi, pika!" Pikachu proudly cried.

"Nenene!" Dedenne cried as well.

"What about the baldy? Did you beat him?" Bonnie asked.

Ash smiled at her. "That rotten guy and his son won't bother us for the time being. Frosthra left them pretty tied up," Ash told them, before walking towards the computer terminal and taking a look at the screen. "So, how's everything? Have you guys found Alain, Mairin and Leona?" Ash asked a little impatiently.

"Yes. Clemont had located them and we were planning their rescue," Serena told Ash. "So far we've been doing so good, but we can't lower our guard. We're deep in enemy territory, and if we make a mistake we will be the ones needing rescue."

"Yeah. As much as I want to rescue Alain and the girls, we can't just rush in," Ash thankfully agreed with her. "Any suggestions on what we should do? Clemont?"

"Given that I have access to the whole base from here, maybe I should stay here and help you navigate it. I can also watch the cameras for potential enemies and open any locked doors," Clemont explained, as he began to dig into his backpack, before producing several earpieces. "Here. With these, we'll be able to stay in contact. I made sure they're impossible to jam."

"Great work, Clemont! You're irreplaceable!" Ash said, as he and everybody else put on the earpieces.

"Once you leave, I'll lock this door to make sure no Team Omega member can enter. Oh, given that Bonnie will want to go with you..." Clemont said, before picking two of his pokeball. "Geigeroach, Bunnelby, come out! Go with Bonnie and keep an eye on her. Also follow her orders if there's a battle, but make sure you don't stray away from her."

"Bu, bunnel!" Bunnelby nodded.

"Roach!" Geigeroach agreed.

"Whoa, really?" Bonnie asked, a little shocked. "I thought you'd want me to stay here with you."

"And I want that, but Ash and Serena are going to need some of my help from my Pokemon, and I can't be in two places at once," the inventor explained. "Plus, in a few months you'll be old enough to legally be a trainer, so I think you're ready for this."

Bonnie smiled at her brother earnestly. "You got it right. Between these two and Dedenne, no Team Omega idiot will stand in our way!"

"One last thing," Clemont said, as he started digging inside his backpack once again. He then produced a pair of black devices, smaller than a TV remote, and handed them to Ash and Serena.

The device had a single red button with the Omega symbol on it.

"I call it the Omega Disabler," Clemont said. "If you find a Team Omega member whose Pokemon carry a Muscular Enhancer or a Shield Generator or something like that, press that button and the device will send a pulse that will destroy those gadgets."

"That will be of a lot of help. Great job, Clemont!" Serena praised.

"A great help indeed. Very well then. Come on girls, let's go! We have three people to rescue!" Ash said before he, Serena and Bonnie left the control room.

...

Meanwhile, in Professor Larkspur's office, the leader of Team Omega was working on his desk as usual, unaware of the commotion that was going on in his main base. Or at least, that's what appeared to be the case.

An alert warning him of an incoming video call popped on his screen. Frowning a little, he clicked on 'Accept', and a new window opened with Alina on it.

"Uh, sir? We have a problem. There are intruders on the base," Alina told him, a bit uneasily.

"Yes, I'm aware, I heard the alarms," Larkspur said, his tone carrying an edge of annoyance. "I assume they're still at large, given your demeanor and the fact that you haven't told me that they've been dealt with."

"Huh, I know, sir. You see, according to our sources, Zebos included, the intruders are Ketchum and his friends," the teal haired woman said.

This gave the professor pause. "Ketchum, you say?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. The gears in his brain started to work in order to unveil the how and why Ash Ketchum and his friends were here. "I see. If I remember correctly, he and Alain were acquaintances. Maybe Alain was able to deliver a message before our men caught him and his companion."

"Yes but... how were they able to find our base?" Alina asked. "They didn't even enter through the main door, but the port at the bottom of the cliff."

"That's not important now. While other people might see it as a problem, it's also an opportunity to finally get our hands on him and his Pokemon. Especially that Greninja of his," Larkspur said, relishing on the idea of said Greninja being finally in his power. "Tell Zebos to lead a squad after him. I'm sure the man will be eager for a rematch."

"Uh... sir, Zebos already did that, and we've been unable to contact him ever since. I'm afraid that those kids might have beaten him and his men again," Alina told him.

Larkspur had to suppress the urge to sigh. When this was over, that man would be lucky if he was only demoted to do menial jobs.

"Alright, this is what we're going to do: given that Ash is here, we're going to assume that the location of this base has been compromised. Fortunately, the Rangers had to transfer many of their men to the Western part of the region in order to deal with the nuclear disasters, so we'll have time to purge our servers and evacuate the base before they arrive.

"But first, I want Ash Ketchum and his friends neutralized and contained. We might have lost Zebos, but we still have you and your sister, as well as Darren," Larkspur told her. "So go and find them and don't contact me again until you complete this mission. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," Alina obediently said before ending the call.

Now that his minion was no longer seeing him, Larkspur took a moment to lean back in his chair and let out a sigh.

"Okay, I better get ready," he said, as he began to type on his computer.

He knew that the possibility of both the twins and Darren failing to stop Ash and his friends were high; not only had he personally seen that boy in action, but he had also watched many videos of his League battles, and he knew that Ketchum wasn't somebody to be

trifled with, despite his youth. Ash had probably fought and defeated trainers way stronger than them, plus he had his friends to help him.

However, one way or another his Captains would wear the intruders down. Which would allow Larkspur to deal the finishing blow and claim his prize.

After all, he'd been dying for an opportunity to put his latest acquisitions to test.

...

Moments later, Ash and his friends were fighting their way up through the Team Omega base. They encountered a few grunts along the way, but they were as easily dispatched as the ones they faced before.

"Kinetmunk, Discharge!" a Team Omega grunt ordered.

"Dodge it with Quick Attack, Splendifowl!" Ash ordered.

The electric chipmunk fired a barrage of lightning bolts at the Paradise Bird Pokemon, who blitzed at it with his wings folded, leaving a trail of white light behind. Splendifowl expertly maneuvered around the electric bolts that fell around him, before slamming into Kinetmunk, sending it crashing against a metallic wall.

"Pangoro, Thunder Punch!" Serena shouted.

"GORO!" Pangoro roared, slamming his electricity-cloaked fist into an unlucky Inflagetah, knocking it out instantly.

The grunts looked at their defeated Pokemon with incredulity, before staring at the trio of intruders with fear in their eyes.

"You should run away now while you have the chance," Serena warned them, while Pangoro punched his open palm menacingly.

After recalling their defeated Pokemon, the grunts decided to wisely take Serena's advice and left the scene.

Ash tapped his earpiece. "Alright Clemont, we're in front of the door, but it appears to be locked, and you need both a card and a password to enter."

"Give me a sec..." Clemont said through the earpiece, the sound of his voice mixed with the faint noise of keys being tapped.

There was a buzzing noise as the door in front of them clicked open.

"Great job, Clemont!" Ash said, not wasting a second to open the door and entering inside, followed by the two girls and the Pokemon.

Ash found himself inside a very large room with eight cells, of which only three of them were occupied. The people inside the cells, Alain, Mairin and Leona, quickly looked through the bars to see the newcomers.

"Ash?" Alain asked, his voice sounding incredulous.

"Serena!" Leona shouted, who unlike Alain was more happy than surprised.

"You know them too?" Mairin asked Leona.

"Clemont, we found them," Serena said while tapping her earpiece. "You can open the cells."

Almost instantly, the doors of all eight cells clicked open, and the prisoners wasted no time to leave them.

"Are you guys okay?" Ash asked them

"As well as we can be. I can't help but wonder how are you guys here and how did you know we were being held in this place, but I think I'll save it for later," Alain said, shaking Ash's hand in gratitude. "For the time being, I'm just glad you're here."

"Well, you can thank this little guy for guiding us here," Bonnie said while pointing at Jerbolta.

"Jer!" Jerbolta cried as it leaped at Leona.

"Jerbolta!" the Alolan trainer squealed in joy, catching the Sand Mouse Pokemon between her arms. "Oh, you did it! You brought help! I'm so proud of you!"

"We can't leave just yet. Not without our Pokemon," Mairin stated.

"It's okay. Clemont said your Pokemon, as well as any personal effects that they took away from you, are being stored inside a locker in the next room," Serena said, pointing at one of the exit doors.

"Let's not waste anymore time then. Time to get our Pokemon back and leave this place," Alain said, as he entered the room Serena had mentioned with a resolute step, with everybody else following him.

Indeed, like Clemont said, the room was filled with a series of lockers with electronic padlocks - thankfully, Clemont had already unlocked them, if the green light was any indication.

"My Pokemon!" Mairin beamed with joy as she recovered the pokeballs with her Pokemon inside.

"And mine!" Leona said, just as happy. "Even Jerbolta's empty pokeball! Hey, wait a minute..." she said, as she started to look through the now empty locker. "My Z-ring isn't here!"

"Neither is my Mega Ring," Alain gravely said as he pocketed his recovered pokeballs. "And Charizard's pokeball is missing."

"What?" Ash asked.

"Maybe it's around here, in another locker?" Serena suggested, as she began to inspect the other lockers.

The others imitated her, but the rest of the lockers were just as empty. Alain's Charizard wasn't there.

Alain looked at Ash with barely contained anger, though thankfully it was obvious the taller boy's ire wasn't aimed at any of the present. "Listen, I'm very thankful for you guys to come here to save us, so I won't ask you anything more of you. But I won't leave this place without Charizard, even if I have to fight all the people here on my own."

"Well, good for you, I was already planning to stay and help you without having to ask me," Ash said, tapping his earpiece. "Clemont, we have a problem. Alain's Charizard isn't here."

"What? That can't be right," Clemont replied, his voice followed by the soft sound of keys being pressed. "Alright, I'll be looking where they could be keeping it, though I may take some time..."

"What if Charizard isn't here anymore? Remember that those guys said that they planned to sell Charizard to the highest bidder..." Mairin wondered, her voice carrying quite some worry.

Alain weighed his companion's words. "Guess there's only one thing we can do: scour this place to find it, or find somebody who knows where Charizard is."

"I'm pretty sure one of the Captains knows something," Ash said. "Man, if I had known that I would have asked Zebos after beating him..."

"Don't beat yourself over that. Come on, let's search this place," Alain said, leaving the storage room and walking through the prisoner's block's exit door, with everybody else following him.

The exit door led to another hallway, this one devoid of any people. However, rather than a single door, the hallway split in two parts.

"Uh, where to?" Bonnie asked, looking at the two bifurcations.

"Charizard could be anywhere in the base," Alain reasoned. "I suggest we split in order to cover more ground and force the enemy to split their forces."

"I'm okay with that. I believe we should have two groups, one with me and another with Serena. That Zebos guy had a Pokemon capable of Mega Evolving, so I wouldn't rule out if any other captain had access to Mega Evolution too. The two of us each have at least one Pokemon capable of Mega Evolution to counter theirs, and we both have an earpiece to contact Clemont," Ash suggested.

"How about if I take Bonnie, Mairin and Leona while Alain goes with Ash?" Serena suggested.

"Even if I'm missing Charizard, I don't think anybody here could stand before Ash and I fighting together. The two of us are more than enough for any of the criminal scum roaming these halls," Alain agreed.

"Still, if you guys are in trouble, don't hesitate to ask for help, you hear me?" Serena told them.

"That goes double for you, Alain," Mairin added.

"Don't worry. I promise you that we will all get out of this mess in one piece," Alain firmly stated.

Before the two groups split, Ash and Serena shared a quick kiss on the lips.

"Good luck," Ash whispered. "And take care."

"You too," she replied, before turning to the rest of the girls. "Come on everyone!"

And thus, the boys and the girls went their separate ways, all of them wondering what kind of foes would be waiting for them, and if they would find Alain's Charizard or if it was too late...

Author's Note: It all looked like it was going to be a clean rescue, just in and out, but nope. The "part I" should have clued you that it wasn't going to be as simple. Now, the raid continues as the group splits up in hopes of finding Alain's Charizard (as well as Alain's keystone and Leona's Z-ring)

What's better than seeing a Lucario being dunken on? Why, two Lucario being dunken on, of course!

Also, I remember that many people complained (not without reason) that Ash let Maury escape the first time the two of them fought, and looking back I admit I should have written Maury's escape differently. Though, I can assure you that this time around Maury and his old man are not going to avoid justice. While it wasn't seen, Dunseraph was able to bring them to the Ranger Station without trouble.

Thanks to bansalarina, Fox McCloude, MegaSalamence64, MarcusDarkus87, hirowriter and Jose4Andres7 for reviewing the last chapter, and special thanks to Viroro-kun for betareading this chapter, whose edits and suggestion made it so much better.

Next chapter, even more non-stop action as Ash and his friends take on Team Omega's full might. In the meantime, don't forget to drop a review with your thoughts on this chapter ;)

Omegageddon, Part II

Chapter 51:

Omegageddon, Part II

Team Omega Base, Route 16

"Nothing?" Ash asked.

Slamming the storage locker close with a loud hit, Alain shook his head. "Nothing here either."

"Let's keep going. We'll have to find it sooner or later," Ash told him before tapping his earpiece. "What about you, Clemont? Any progress on your end?"

"I found a few files that said that you, Alain and Leona were targets of Team Omega, but nothing on Alain's Charizard in particular," Clemont replied.

"That's good, right? If they had sold Charizard already, it would be registered somewhere on their files," Ash reasoned.

"I imagine that's right," Clemont said.

Ash nodded, as he and Alain exited the storage room and went to look for other places where Charizard could be held.

"Ash, you said you've been dealing with these guys before, right?" Alain asked. After Ash nodded, the taller boy added: "And you can't think of any place where they may keep the Pokemon they're going to sell?"

Ash took on a pensive stance. "Back when we raided that Kevlar Town base, there was this large room with cages where they were keeping all the Pokemon they were planning to sell. Maybe this base

has something like that here where Charizard is being held?" the raven haired teen asked, before tapping his earpiece again. "Clemont, try to see if you can find any room where they keep all the Pokemon they sell. Maybe Charizard is there."

"Good idea! Give me a sec..." Clemont replied.

"In the meantime, let's continue searching this base, just in case," Ash suggested, something Alain agreed with.

As they carried on, they encountered a trio of Team Omega grunts that quickly sent their Pokemon to stop them. Alain sent one of his Pokemon out, Voltasu, and before Ash could have the chance to do the same to assist his friend, the Three Legged Pokemon had already knocked out one of the enemy Pokemon out with a powerful Dragon Rage, and it didn't take long for other two to follow suit once they took one of the strongest Thunder Ash had ever seen..

Seeing themselves so thoroughly overwhelmed, the Team Omega grunts ran away, like many others like them had done so far. Their way free, the duo continued onwards.

"Wow. That was pretty intense," Ash observed. "Had your Voltasu fought with such ferocity during our match..."

Alain clenched his jaw and curled one of his hands into a fist. "Charizard was my first Pokemon. My oldest partner who has been with me through thick and thin. And these people took it away from me. I don't feel like holding back on these scum, and guess that neither do my other Pokemon."

"I understand how you're feeling. While it's not the same situation, it was because of Team Omega that Pikachu can't fight for the time being," Ash reminded Alain.

"Pika..." Pikachu softly whined, as he dropped his head.

"Don't worry buddy, Nurse Joy said in the last checkup that you were doing pretty fine. I'm sure you'll be back to full health in no time," Ash reassured his starter before looking back to Alain. "Just like how we will get Charizard back."

Ash's unbridled optimism managed to draw a small smile from Alain.

"Hey you, stop right there!"

Smile that was instantly wiped away the moment a pair of Team Omega members appeared before them. These ones were wearing a radically different uniform than the ones Ash had faced before, the metallic greys and muted greens gone, replaced with deep dark blue with vibrant green accents, a combination that reminded Ash of the coloration of Nuclear Pokemon.

Both of them had a type of pokeball in their hands that was vaguely familiar, but couldn't remember from where.

"Nuclear balls...?" Alain asked upon noticing the balls. Oh, so that's why they looked familiar.

"Go, Corsoreef!"

"You too, Gliscor!"

And indeed, a pair of Nuclear Pokemon emerged from the balls when they opened. Unlike the feral and brutal Nuclear Pokemon, these were standing in front of their trainers awaiting orders as if they were perfectly trained. They also had glowing red eyes instead of their usual soulless white ones, and were wearing a metallic collar with the Omega symbol on their neck.

"Splendifowl, I choose you!" Ash said, wasting no time and sending his own Pokemon.

"Go, Majungold!" Alain followed, sending his Fossil Pokemon.

The battle began. While Ash had experience fighting against Nuclear Pokemon, all such Pokemon he had fought (with the exception of Clemont's Pokemon during spars and Alain's Xenogen) were all feral beasts that didn't follow any type of tactic beyond attacking mindlessly what was in front of them. This battle, though, once again reminded the Kantonian how strong Nuclear Pokemon could be while directed by a trainer.

"Majungold, Golden Fist!" Alain ordered.

"Corsoreef, block it with Protect!" one Team Omega grunt shouted.

"Get behind Corsoreef, Gliscor!" his partner followed. "And counter with Dark Pulse!"

"Repel that Dark Pulse with Mirror Shot, Splendifowl!" Ash ordered.

As expected, the golden glowing fist of Majungold smashed uselessly against the energy field erected by Corsoreef, while Gliscor fired a stream of dark and purple energy from behind. Said energy crashed against another beam of grayish green color, producing a small explosion.

"These guys know how to use Nuclear Pokemon..." Alain observed.

"Yeah, but how are they able to control them? These aren't like your Xenogen or Clemont's Geigeroach..." Ash began.

"I have the feeling those collars they're wearing have something to do with it," Alain said.

"The collars... wait! The Omega Disabler!" Ash said in realization, as he pulled out from the pocket of his jacket Clemont's latest invention with a triumphant grin. He aimed the small remote at the Pokemon and pressed the button. "Alright, take that!"

However, much to Ash's shock and disappointment, nothing happened.

"Take that?" one of the grunts repeated. "Are we supposed to be afraid of that little remote or something?"

"What? I don't understand..." Ash said, as he kept pressing the button to no avail. "Why doesn't it work?"

"We can worry about that later. Let's defeat these guys the old fashioned way," Alain suggested, and Ash had no choice but to do as he said.

"Right!"

...

"Of course Clemont's invention was bound to fail," Bonnie deadpanned.

Just like Ash and Alain, the girls also run into a group of Team Omega grunts that sent several Nuclear Pokemon against them.

And just like Ash, Serena had also tried to use the Omega Disabler, given that the Pokemon were clearly being mind controlled by those hi-tech looking collars they were carrying around their necks. But when Serena pressed the button, nothing happened.

"Keep calm, we have all our Pokemon, we can just give them a good, old fashioned ass whooping!" Leona said, sending her Cocancer to battle.

The other three girls agreed.

"Go, Sylveon!" Serena said, her Fairy-type coming out ready to battle, the honey blonde feeling thankful that her Pokemon had overcome her fear of Nuclear-types

"Come out, Lulu!" Mairin said, sending her Glaslug.

Bonnie merely nodded at Bunnelby and Geigeroach, already out of the pokeball, who joined the battle.

The ensuing fight was fierce, but eventually the girls sent their attackers packing, and were allowed to continue their advance through the base.

"Serena, you there?" Clemont's voice asked through her earpiece.

"Clemont!" Serena replied, letting some frustration slip when she said the inventor's name. "I've tried that disabler of yours and it didn't work! Are you sure you built it right?"

Clemont took a couple seconds to answer. "I just got a message from Ash informing me of the same failure. Though, before you say anything else, did you try to use it on some sort of mind control collar being worn by Nuclear Pokemon?"

"Er... yes," she said, a bit surprised that Clemont would guess that.

"Ash tried to do the same. I just checked on their files, and they have something called the Pokemon Willpower Suppressant, a mind-controlling collar that they use to subdue Nuclear Pokemon to their will," the inventor explained. "I had designed the Omega Disabler with the gadgets I had seen or had the blueprints of, such as the Muscular Enhancer, so I'm afraid there might be situations where the Omega Disabler won't work."

Serena sighed, and repressed the urge to call Clemont out for telling her that just now. "Alright then. We'll keep going. How are the boys doing?"

"Last time I checked, they didn't find any meaningful obstacles in their way, but they didn't have any luck finding Charizard," Clemont told her.

"Guess we have no choice but keep searching the base. Sooner or later, Charizard will appear," Serena replied, gathering all the resolve and optimism she could muster.

"In fact, that's why I contacted you," Clemont said. "I accessed the base's map, and if you turn left the next hallway, right to the next, and go straight until you find a big door, you'll find a large storage room. According to these files, there are holding pens with Pokemon in said room. Maybe Charizard is in one of them."

"Alright then, in that case we better check that place first," Serena said, before turning to the other girls. "Clemont said he had found a place where Charizard might be."

"Really!?" Mairin almost squealed, her eyes glinting with hope. "Then what are we waiting for! Lead the way, Serena!"

And lead them she did. Thankfully, they didn't encounter any more Team Omega grunts on their way - she liked to entertain the idea that Ash and Alain were causing them so much trouble, they were funneling all their troops in their futile way to stop them - and reached a large double door with the Omega symbol painted in the middle.

"Clemont, we're here!" Serena informed him.

"Alright, the door should be open... right now," as Clemont said this, the double doors slid to the side with a swishing noise, allowing the foursome of girls passage into the massive room. "Now, let's make sure that- hey, what gives?" Clemont asked.

"Clemont? Everything's alright?" Serena asked, sounding a little worried.

"I think...? I mean, I got an error screen when I tried- hey, they kicked me out of the server!" Clemont said, panic slipping through his voice. "Oh boy, this is bad... if they kicked me out, they must have found out that I was meddling with their systems... I'm afraid I won't be able to help you guys anymore."

"It's okay, Clemont. You helped us a lot already," the honey blonde reassured him. "Go and join Ash and Alain. I'm sure they could use

some help."

"Understood. I'll tell them I'm coming. Take care you four." Clemont said.

"We will, and don't worry, I'll make sure Bonnie is safe at all times," Serena said, ending the transmission, and looking at her teammates. "Alright, be careful there. We no longer have Clemont to watch our backs," Serena advised as she slowly entered the room.

The walls were lined with holding pens, and there were many metallic cages of varying sizes scattered across the room, not dissimilar to those they used to put all the Nuclear Pokemon they had caught at Nuclear Plant Epsilon (and briefly, Pikachu and Dedenne).

The feral, unsettling noises coming from the cages were a pretty big hint over what kind of Pokemon were inside, something that didn't feel Serena with confidence. And indeed, when she peeked into one of the cages, she was greeted by the lovely sight of a Nuclear Chynmunk leaping at her, before slamming against the cage's door.

"There are Nuclear Pokemon inside these cages!" Bonnie said, as she inspected some other cages.

"There are also more nuclear nasties inside the holding pens as well," Leona said, tapping the steel door of one of the pens with her index finger.

"Hmmmmmm... it doesn't appear that Charizard is here," Mairin said, disappointment evident in her voice.

"And we can't release this Pokemon either. Not unless we want to end up torn to shreds," Serena said. She believed that this would be like that time when she, her friends and later the Dunsparce Gang raided that Team Omega base on Kevlar Town and Bonnie, Aisha and her had found a storage room where all the Pokemon they planned to sell were being kept. Even if they didn't find Charizard,

she was sure that any Pokemon being held against their will here would be more than happy to assist them.

But unfortunately, these Pokemon wouldn't see them as their saviors or liberators.

"Charizard doesn't seem to be here. There is nothing but Nuclear Pokemon in cages," Serena pointed out.

"What a pity. Oh well, it was worth a shot," Mairin said, her head hung, a little disappointed.

"Then let's get out of here. This place gives me the creeps!" Bonnie said, shuddering a little.

"Bun," Bunnelby nodded in agreement, shooting a fearful look at the cages with the rabid Nuclear Pokemon inside.

As Serena and her friends walked towards the exit, the double doors slammed closed all of sudden, much to their surprise.

"What the...?" Leona asked, as she tried to pry the door open, to no avail. Mairin went to help her, but the result was the same. "It's closed!"

"Call Clemont!" Mairin asked Serena. "Tell him to open the gate!"

"Clemont is no longer in the control room! They found out what he was doing and cut his access off!" Serena replied. It took a second for the horror of such realization to sink in.

That moment, there was a loud buzzing noise, followed by the clicking sound of the cages and gates of the holding pens being opened. For a moment, silence reigned.

"Please tell me the cages haven't been opened..." Leona whimpered.

A Nuclear Kinetmunk took a tentative step out of the cage, followed by a Nuclear Costraw. A Nuclear Tanscure emerged from one of the holding pens. Little by little, the large room was being filled by Nuclear Pokemon, who stalked towards the four girls, the radioactive beasts fixing the girls with bloodthirsty stares.

The girls gulped loudly as they took a step back, while Bunnelby and Geigeroach put themselves between them and the incoming Nuclear horde. Serena, however, pushed down her growing terror and took a step forward, pulling out two of her pokeballs.

"Come on everybody, we won't get out of this without a fight," Serena stated, trying to sound as resolute as possible. "They outnumber us, but remember that Nuclear Pokemon are both very fragile and only attack by mindlessly charging forward. We can beat them, we have done it before!"

"Yeah! We totally kicked their asses when we fought them on Bealbeach City!" Leona said, her bravery slowly returning. "Mairin, Bonnie, are you with us?"

"Of course!"

"Yeah!"

Several pokeballs flew into the air, releasing more Pokemon that joined Bunnelby and Geigeroach in their stand.

And a battle of epic proportions broke out.

...

While Serena and the girls tried to get out of the trap they had been locked into, Ash and Alain searched yet another room, one that looked like a small lab. They left no drawer closed and no shelf uninspected, but once again, there was no sight of Alain's starter.

"Huh, a Water Stone," Alain said upon opening a drawer. He quickly pocketed it. "Good. Mairin has been asking for one."

Normally Ash would say something about such a blatant act of theft, but in this case he felt it wasn't undeserved.

He was about to leave the small lab and continue their search when his earpiece pinged.

"Clemont?" Ash asked.

"I have bad news, Ash," Clemont's voice said, sounding between worried and disappointed. "They found out about my intrusion in their computer system and kicked me out. I'm afraid I won't be able to help you remotely anymore."

"It's okay Clemont. You already helped us a lot," Ash reassured him.

"Given that I'm of no use here, I'll be joining you and Alain. Make sure the GPS of your Pokegear is on," Clemont told us.

"I always keep it on, so don't worry about that," Ash replied. "Say, what about the girls? Have you talked to them?"

"They were inspecting a storage room that we believed Team Omega used to store the Pokemon they traffic with. If Charizard is there, they will tell us," the inventor replied.

"Let's hope it's there. Though in that case, Alain and I will continue searching our side of the base." Ash said. "Be careful on your way here, you are on your own."

"Don't worry, I still have four of my Pokemon battle-ready. Plus I'm sure Alain and you cleared all the way of potential enemies," Clemont said before ending the communication.

"Ash? Everything's alright?" Alain asked.

"Sadly, Clemont got busted. He won't be able to help us anymore from that control center. But he will be joining us," Ash said.

Alain nodded. "Good. With him helping us directly we'll be able to search this place all the quicker," Alain said, his barely restrained impatience evident in the tone of his voice. "Come on, let's keep looking for another place to search."

Wordlessly, Ash nodded and followed the taller teen back into the hallway and continued their search. Having registered all the current rooms, the duo took a flight of metallic stairs that took them to the upper level. They opened the door that led them to another hallway.

"Well, well, look who came to our home, sister," a female voice said.

"A pair of little shits asking for an ass beating, that's who!" another almost identical sounding, but louder female voice replied.

"You!" Ash said.

In front of them were two women in Team Omega customized uniforms, identical in everything except their hair, eye and lip color, one of them being teal and the other brown.

"Do you know them, Ash?" Alain asked.

"Alina and Anika. A pair of Team Omega higher ups. We fought against them a few times after we arrived at Bealbeach City," Ash told Alain.

"Good. If they're important, perhaps they know where my Charizard is," Alain said, his glare piercing the twin women as his hand reached for a pokeball.

"Oh, we do know, tall, dark and handsome," Alina, the teal haired sister, replied as she also reached for a pokeball.

"But if you think we're so stupid as to tell you, think again!" Anika, the brown haired sister, added as she mimicked her twin. "Because

we're taking you back to your cage, and Ketchum here will be making you some company."

"Yes. The professor has been very interested in your Greninja, and now that we have another chance to get it, we aren't going to let it slip away," the teal haired sister said, following with a dark chuckle.

"If you think you're going to get my Greninja or any of my Pokemon, you're the ones who will have another thing coming!" Ash hotly said, tossing a pokeball forward. "Frosthra, I choose you!"

"And I'm getting Charizard back! Majungold, go!" Alain followed.

As the capture devices opened, the frost moth and gold-plated dinosaur appeared in front of Ash and Alain, the two of them ready to fight.

Alina said, tossing her pokeball forward. "To battle, Praseopunk!"

"Make it hurt, Neopunk!" Anika said.

The two pokeball opened at once, releasing the Twin Electric and Psychic-type Pokemon. Yellow sparks began to jump from one to the other as their Plus and Minus abilities were triggered by each other. Then, Anika pulled a remote and pressed a button on it.

"Personal Shield Generator, activate!"

Orange honeycomb spherical barriers flashed for a second around each of the two Team Omega Pokemon before disappearing.

This confused Alain to the point of overpowering his burning anger. "What... what did they do?"

"Dammit, not that thing again!" Ash protested. "Their Pokemon have a device that projects a shield around them that blocks any attacks."

"Exactly! And we improved on it since the last time we fought, so don't think that the trick you and your four-eyed friend used before

will work a second time!" Anika boasted.

As gritted his teeth as he glared at the offending devices, before a realization dawned upon him. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled the Omega Disabler and aimed it at the enemy Pokemon. "Okay, let's give this a second chance..."

Ash pressed the button. There was a low pitched buzz, followed by the Personal Shield Generators exploding as if they had firecrackers inside them, bursting into pieces and falling to the ground, making the Twin Pokemon flinch in pain, much to their trainers' utter shock.

"Yes, it worked!" Ash cheered. "Science is so amazing!"

"Pika!" Pikachu agreed.

"W-What... !?" Anika stuttered, her eyes wide open.

"The shield generators!" Alina almost screamed. "What did you do!?"

"A little something made by my 'four eyed friend', who is a better inventor than any among your sorry lot will hope to be!" Ash said, a confident smirk appearing on his face. "Now let's see how well you do in a fair fight! Let's go, Alain!"

Alain's smirk matched Ash's own. "My pleasure."

"Pleasure is something you'll have very little of, you pair of dipshits!" Anika angrily snarled. "Neopunk, Shockwave!"

"And you use Energy Ball, Praseopunk!" Anika ordered.

As the pink Twin Pokemon released a barrage of yellow lightning bolts that homed on Frosthra, its green twin formed a sphere of energy of the same color between its hands and tossed it at Majungold.

"Frosthra, get in front of Majungold and use Protect!" Ash ordered.

"Fro, frosthra!" Frosthra buzzed obediently as he hovered in front of the prehistoric Pokemon as he erected a green energy barrier. The electrical punch and emerald orb smashed uselessly against it.

"Now Manjungold, Rock Slide over them!" Alain ordered.

"Ma, jun!" Majungold said, raising the massive gold bars it had for arms over its head.

A multitude of rocks appeared over the Twin Pokemon, before solid pain rained upon them. The two Electric and Psychic-type Pokemon let out distorted cries of pain.

"Not so easy now that you no longer can't cheat your way to victory, huh?" Ash taunted, savoring the payback he was dishing to the two women, his first battle against them still fresh in his mind despite being several months ago. "Frosthra, Shadow Claw on Praseopunk!"

"Stop it with Instant Crush, Neopunk!" Anika quickly shouted.

Frosthra dived forward, his two front claws covered in a dark gray ghostly aura as the pink Twin Pokemon held out a ghostly hand, before curling its fingers into a fist, as if it was gripping an imaginary object. Frosthra was stopped mid air, the Shadow Claws vanishing as a pink outline surrounded him. The Frost Moth Pokemon began to let out choking noises as he took his front claws to his neck.

"Frosthra!" Ash cried.

"You're over your heads if you think you can defeat us. Shield Generator or not, we're the superior battlers!" Alina boasted. "Now, Thunder Punch, Praseopunk!"

"Stop it with Crunch, Majungold!" Alain called.

The green Twin Pokemon quickly glided towards the immobilized bug, its right hand curled into a fist covered in a mass of electricity, before thrusting it forward. However, before it could hit Frosthra

Majungold appeared between them, jaws wide open and teeth glowing with a white light, before clamping said jaws onto the ghostly hand.

Both Majungold and Prasepunk cried in pain upon taking each others' attack, though the latter had it worse than the former. Despite the electricity, the Gold Bar Pokemon kept its jaws locked onto Prasepunk's hand, and the Electric and Psychic-type Pokemon had to pull for a few painful moments before releasing the hand free.

"Frosthra, String Shot! Aim for the face!" Ash commanded.

"Fr-Fro... !" Frosthra buzzed between chokes, as he managed to spit a thread of sticky web which landed right on Neopunk's visor, blinding it and forcing it to cancel its psychic hold on the ice insect.

"Great! Now follow up with Shadow Claw now that it's blinded!" Ash shouted, throwing a punch forward.

"Prasepuk, protect-"

"No you won't!" Alain interrupted her. "Ice Punch on the ground!"

"MAJ!" Majungold roared as it raised its arms, which were quickly covered in a freezing aura, before slamming them into the ground, sending a wave of ice forward, and forcing the green Twin Pokemon back.

"FRO!" Frosthra buzzed, as he delivered a swipe with a claw covered in a ghostly veil at Neopunk, smacking it backwards.

Anika let out a snarl, her nostrils flaring as she greeted her teeth. Ash wondered how long it had been since these two fought in a fair battle. "Neopunk Dazzling Gleam! As big as you can!"

"Frosthra, Protect! And shield Majungold with it!" Ash ordered.

Neopunk let out a low pitched, distorted cry as its pink body turned an even brighter and shinier shade of the same color as it started to

gather faeric energy, while the Frost Moth Pokemon hovered in front of his battle partner and erected a green energy barrier. Neopunk released the stored energy in the form of a barrage of pink and white energy bolts, but all of them crashed uselessly against Frosthra's defensive move.

"Now, Praseopunk, Get Lucky! That bug won't be able to use Protect a second time!" Anika quickly ordered, taking advantage of the opportunity created by her sister.

The green Electric and Psychic-type Pokemon brought its hands together, and thrust them outwards while releasing a stream of pink energy surrounded by rings of the same color.

"Majungold, it's time for us to protect our partners!" Alain said, "Shield Frosthra with your body!"

"Maju!" Majungold nodded, as it jumped in front of Frosthra and crossed its huge arms in front of its body as a defense.

"Alain, what are you doing!? That's a Psychic-type move, Majungold will take a lot of damage!" Ash asked, looking at the Kalosian teen as if he had grown a second face.

Alain didn't reply and confidently looked at his Pokemon. What was he planning with such a reckless move?

"M-Maj!" Majungold cried in pain as the attack hit.

Alain smirked. "Substitute!"

Oh, so that's what.

Majungold disappeared in a burst of smoke, leaving a green dinosaur-looking doll in its place, which was quickly vaporized by the Psychic-type attack.

"Recover the health you've expended on that move with Drain Punch!" Alain ordered.

Majungold reappeared next to Praseopunk, both its golden arms glowing with a green aura, as it smashed them one after the other into the Green Twin Pokemon, sending it tumbling against its siblings, while green colored orbs flowed from Praseopunk into Majungold.

"Prasepunk-!"

"Frosthra, Bug Buzz! Make it loud!" Ash commanded.

"Thra!" Frosthra nodded, and started flapping his wings so fast they were blurry, sending destructive soundwaves forward.

The soundwaves smashed against the two entangled Pokemon, blasting them backwards. They fell to the cold metallic ground while letting out low pitched, distorted cries, a sound that reminded Ash of a boombox that ran out of battery mid-song. Needless to say, they didn't get up.

"Our... our Pokemon... !" Alina said in shock, looking at the defeated duo.

"Not so easy without those little gadgets of yours, huh?" Ash taunted the twins.

"Now tell us where do you have Charizard, or things will get very ugly for you," Alain said just as Majungold menacingly slammed its arms together, making a loud, clanking noise for added emphasis.

After the Team Omega captains recalled their Pokemon, no one said anything, almost looking as if the twins were genuinely considering the idea of surrendering. That's it, until a deep scowl appeared on Anika's face.

"You... you think you defeated us, you pieces of shit!?" the brown haired sister said, her whole body trembling with rage. "Oh, you have no idea what's coming for you! Sister, let's go all out! Make it hurt, Sableye!"

"To battle, Gardevoir!" the teal haired sister said.

Two Pokemon Ash was already familiar with materialized in front of Frosthra and Majungold. The raven haired teen had only seen that Sableye once, briefly during the battle inside Power Plant Epsilon. He had also seen Anika's Gardevoir, though she had never used it to battle, only to run away via Teleport. But given their demeanor, it didn't look like they were trying to run away.

"No more holding back!" Anika shouted, showing the back of his gloved hand, her sister mimicking her. There were Keystones embedded into the gloves. Also, Ash noticed that the Gardevoir and Sableye were wearing collars with Mega Stones on them. "Sableye, bring your true power to the surface and rain suffering upon our foes!"

"Come on Gardevoir, reach deep within your inner power and bring destruction of a scale never seen!" Alina added.

"MEGA EVOLVE!" the two of them said at once while touching their respective Keystones.

Tendrils of light shot from the two Keystones and Mega Stones, merging into beams of colorful light that linked trainers and Pokemon. Through this link, the two Pokemon transformed, taking on more powerful forms thanks to the bond that they shared with their respective trainers. The transformation finished, as the helix of Mega Evolution briefly flashed in front of the two Pokemon.

Ash scowled, and pointed a finger at the Team Omega captains. "So, you can Mega Evolve your Pokemon. This changes nothing! That Zebos guy also could and I still defeated him!"

"And you think that because we're both Captains, we're the same?" Anika roared, sounding insulted by the comparison. "Alright then, no more words! Fight us and see if it's the same as facing that bald imbecile!"

"Gardevoir, hold the two of them with Psychic!" Alina ordered.

"Vooooir... !" the Embrace Pokemon cried as it raised its arms, a pink outline appeared around its body.

Said outline also appeared around Ash and Alain's Pokemon, as Frosthra and Majungold were immobilized and lifted mid air.

"F-Fro?"

"Gold!"

"Frosthra, calm down! Interrupt Gardevoir's attack with String Shot!" Ash ordered.

"Ash, wait-!" Alain was about to say, but it was too late.

"Not so fast! Sableye, intercept the attack!" Anika shouted.

The Darkness Pokemon, carrying its massive red gemstone, placed itself between Gardevoir and the incoming attack, using the gem as a shield. The precious stone began to glow with a crimson light, and when the String Shot hit it, it was sent backwards, almost as if the attack had been mirrored. The String Shot hit Frosthra and Majungold, tying them together.

Ash opened his eyes wide, looking confused. "What... what just happened...?"

"When Sableye Mega Evolves, its ability changes to Magic Bounce!" Alain told him, his voice carrying a hint of anger at Ash's blunder. "It reflects non-damaging attacks!"

"Exactly! But your Frosthra won't be in this battle long enough to lament such a mistake!" Anika boasted. "Sableye, Power Gem!"

"Gardevoir, Focus Blast!" Alina ordered.

Even as Gardevoir released the Psychic hold in order to form an orange sphere of destructive power, Frosthra and Majungold were unable to move, as they were restrained by the reflected String Shot, meaning that they were like sitting Ducklett. Then, after a few, agonizing seconds, Gardevoir sent the normally inaccurate energy missile at the ice insect and golden fossil, followed by a multicolored beam of light that Sableye fired from its giant gemstone. Both attacks collided at once, resulting in an explosion that shook the whole hallway.

"Frosthra!"

"Majungold!"

When the smoke of the explosion vanished, the two Pokemon were laying on the ground, their limbs sprawled open, their bodies full of bruises and their eyes all swirly.

"Ha! Look at that! Your pathetic Pokemon went down after a single move from our Mega Evolved ones!" Anika boasted, placing her fists on her hips.

"So be good kids, and surrender already. No matter what other Pokemon you send against us, the result will be the same," Alina warned.

"We'll see about that!" Ash said, pulling out another pokeball.

"Metalynx, I choose you!"

"I won't leave this place until I have Charizard back, even if I have to fight you criminal scum with my bare hands! Chainite, go!" Alain said.

The two pokeball opened at once, releasing Ash's first Tandorian starter and Alain's Dark and Ghost-type Pokemon, both ready to battle. A shadowy tendril shot from Chainite's shadow, linking it to the Gardevoir's own shadow, but leaving Sableye untouched. Despite this, Alina didn't seem particularly bothered, maybe because in case

things went south and she needed to flee, Chainite's Shadow tag wouldn't stop Gardevoir from teleporting away.

"Come on Metalynx! Let's show them how strong we can be... !" Ash held his shuriken necklace, and touched the Keystone inside with two fingers. "... TOGETHER!"

Once again, tendrils of light flew from both the Keystone and the Mega Stone attached to Metalynx's collar, merging together and linking trainer and Pokemon. Through their bond, Metalynx was allowed to transform and reach her advanced form, the helix of Mega Evolution flashing in front of her once the metamorphosis was over, before letting out a powerful roar.

The Team Omega sisters, however, weren't impressed.

"So you can also Mega Evolve your Pokemon, on top of that Greninja," Alina noticed.

"Even then, it's still two versus one! We know for a fact that none of the Pokemon your little buddy has are capable of Mega Evolving! Without Charizard, you're nothing!" Anika taunted.

"While Charizard might be my strongest partner, that doesn't mean that the rest of my Pokemon are any less capable!" Alain fired back.

"Well said!" Ash agreed.

"Bold words from a pair of kids way over their heads," Alina said, condescendingly shaking her head. "Gardevoir, Mystical Fire!"

"Gaaaar... !" Gardevoir cried, drawing a circle of flames with one burning hand, before thrust both hands inside the circle, releasing a stream of flames with rings of fire around it.

"Dodge it, and counter with Night Slash!" Ash ordered.

"Meta!" Metalynx growled as she sidestepped the coming inferno, dashing forward while the blade across her metallic arm was coated

in an aura of darkness. Once she was close enough, she pounced on her enemy and swung the blade at it.

"Teleport," Alina said in an almost bored tone.

In a flash of light, Gardevoir disappeared before their eyes, before reappearing a couple meters away from Metalynx. Ash clenched his fists as he sensed a headache coming; he wasn't looking forward to a repeat of the Sheldon battle involving Teleport spam.

"Sableye, Night Shade on Metalynx!" Anika ordered.

"Chainite, block that attack with Shadow Claw!" Alain countered.

Sableye aimed its giant gem at Metalynx as it gathered dark power, before releasing it in the form of a barrage of black and purple energy tendrils. Chainite, however, jumped between the attack and its partner, its claws of solid smoke having doubled in length and glowing with a dark purple light, and used said claws to slash away at the coming harmful tendrils.

"Your friend's Pokemon isn't even Mega Evolved, yet you need him to protect yours. Isn't that shameful?" Alina taunted. "Gardevoir, Psychic on Metalynx!"

"Vooooir... !" Gardevoir spread its arms, as both its eyes and body glowed with a pink aura. It was followed by a double arm thrust that send a telekinetic wave of destructive power at the Armored Pokemon.

"Chainite, block it! It won't do you any harm!" Alain ordered.

Obeying its trainer, the Retribution Pokemon put himself once again between an incoming attack and its partner, taking it in full. But like Alain had said, the Psychic had no effect on the Dark and Ghost-type Pokemon.

"Well done Alain! Come on Metalyx, Iron Tail on Gardevoir!" Ash ordered, capitalizing on the opportunity the Kalosian had brought.

"Not so fast, kiddies! Sableye, Swagger!" Anika ordered.

The Darkness Pokemon glowed with a crimson aura, as it rested on its giant gem with its arms folded shooting Chainite a tooty smile.

"Ch-Chaaa... !" Chainite stammered, as its body started to tremble, the same aura appearing around it.

"Chainite... !" Alain tried to call him.

"NITE!" Chainite then turned around and attempted to eviscerate Metalyx with Shadow Claw.

"Chainite, stop!" Alain shouted. "Get a hold of yourself!"

But the Retribution Pokemon didn't listen, as it tried to slash Metalyx. The Armored Pokemon used her tail, glowing with a silvery light, to parry the attacks as she was pushed backwards.

"Chainite, stop! Come on, snap out of it!" Alain angrily shouted. Unfortunately, Chainite didn't listen to him.

"Now's our chance, Sableye! Punishment on Chainite!" Anika ordered.

"Teleport behind Metalyx and use Mystical Fire! Try to hit both of them with the attack, Gardevoir!" Alina followed.

Sableye's giant gem began to glow with a bright amethyst aura as the Pokemon hauled it towards Chainite and smacking Alain's Pokemon from the back with it. Meanwhile, Gardevoir teleported behind Metalyx and launched another stream of flames surrounded by rings of fire. The attack not only caught Metalyx, but also hit Chainite, just like its trainer had wanted.

"Chainite!" Alain shouted.

"Metalynx!" Ash cried.

"Pika!"

While Metalynx had been able to weather the attack thanks to its Heatproof ability, Chainite was in much worse shape. Ash had to admit that using Punishment, an attack that hits increasingly harder the more the target Pokemon increased its capabilities, in conjunction with Swagger, which increased the attack of the target Pokemon, was pretty clever. Add it the Mystical Fire and the fact that Chainite wasn't a Pokemon with high durability or resistance, and well...

"We told you that no matter how hard you try, you won't defeat us when we stop holding back!" Anika boasted. "Now Sableye, finish off that pathetic Chainite with Power Gem!"

"Sa, sable!" Sableye cried, grinning gleefully as it began to gather energy inside its giant gem.

But as was about to be reminded, Alain wasn't somebody whose Pokemon could be defeated that easily.

"If we're going to fall then we're taking you down with us! Chainite, Destiny Bond!" Alain ordered.

"Ch-chaaa... !" Chainite grunted, its body glowing with a grim purple aura.

Alina's grin of superiority was instantly wiped out of her face, replaced by a look of both concern and fear.

"Shit a million times! Sableye, stop, you dumb fuck!" the brown haired sister shouted.

Fortunately for her, Sableye was able to cancel its attack before it was fired, saving itself from being knocked out.

"Quickly Metalynx! Energy Ball at Sableye!" Ash ordered.

"Oh no you won't! Intercept it with Focus Blast, Gardevoir!" Alina replied.

Metalynx opened her jaws, forming an emerald orb of power before firing it at the Darkness Pokemon. Meanwhile, Gardevoir formed between its hands yet another sphere of power colored blazing orange, and launched it at Metalyx's attack. The Focus Blast smashed against the Energy Ball, resulting in an explosion of orange and green.

"Thanks for keeping that nosy Gardevoir busy, Ash. Now we can do this: Pain Split!" Alain ordered.

"Oh fuck!" Anika cursed.

A red outline appeared around both Chainite and Sableye, as some of the latter's wounds and bruises quickly disappeared and reappeared on Sableye's body. The Darkness Pokemon fell to one knee while grabbing its giant gem, wheezing at the unexpected wave of pain that washed over its body, while Chainite stood straighter now that he had recovered some of its lost energy.

"Well done Chainite! Follow up with Shadow Claw!" Alain ordered.

Chainite's claws grew even longer than the previous time it used that attack thanks to the boost provided by Swagger, and dashed towards its fellow Dark and Ghost-type, ready to tear it to shreds.

"Parry it with Punishment!" Anika ordered.

"Gardevoir, help Sableye with Moonblast!" Alina said, her voice carrying a tone of urgency.

"Don't let her Metalynx! Energy Ball!" Ash hotly shouted.

As Sableye blocked as well as it could Chainite's claw swipes with its giant gemstone, Metalynx fired from her mouth a green orb of light at Gardevoir. The Embrace Pokemon, however, teleported out of the

way before reappearing to the right of Chainite, a glowing orb of swirling pink and white light between its hands, before smashing said orb into Alain's Pokemon.

Chainite screeched in pain as it was blasted back by the super effective attack.

"Chainite!" Alain cried.

"Well done, sister!" Anika praised her teal haired teen. "Now finish it off with Night Shade!"

"Block it with Night Slash, Metalynx!" Ash quickly ordered.

As Sableye fired multiple streams of necrotic energy at the downed Retribution Pokemon, Metalynx quickly jumped in front of her partner, the blade on her foreleg covered in a dark purple aura, and with a mighty swipe the Ghost-type move was neutralized.

"Alain, it's your Chainite alright?" Ash asked in concern.

"It's okay, don't worry," Alain reassured Ash. "Though, we better finish this soon. The longer this battle goes on, the slimmer our chances of victory. I hate to admit this, but having two Mega Evolved Pokemon on their side versus our one will give them the advantage in the long run."

"Yeah. Plus Gardevoir and Sableye are crafty Pokemon. Especially that Gardevoir and its constant teleporting," the raven haired teen said, glaring at the offending Pokemon.

"I have an idea. If you can keep Sableye busy for a few moments, my Chainite can stop that Gardevoir from abusing Teleport," Alain said, his voice only loud enough for Ash to listen.

"Understood. Leave it to me then," Ash told his battle partner.

"What are you fuckers whispering about!?" Anika called them out. "Whatever you plan to do, it won't work! Sableye, Power Gem on

Chainite!"

"Intercept it with Energy Ball, Metalyx!" Ash ordered.

The Darkness Pokemon fired a multicolored beam of light at Chainite. Fortunately, said beam of light was blocked by an emerald orb of energy, producing an explosion of vibrant colors.

"Metalyx, now! Get close to Sableye and use Iron Tail!" Ash said, pumping a fist forward.

"META!" Metalyx roared, as the feline pounced towards the Darkness Pokemon, her machete-shaped tail glowing with a silvery light.

"Stop that Metalyx with Psychic, Gardevoir!" Alina ordered, throwing a hand forward.

"Gaaaar... !" Gardevoir cried as it extended a hand towards Metalyx.

"And make sure to use Teleport the moment Chainite tries anything!" Alina warned her Pokemon.

The Embrace Pokemon's eyes and body started to shine with a pink light, and so did Metalyx, who was stopped mid air by Gardevoir's psychic power. Ash couldn't help but be amazed at such a powerful Psychic move, being able to hold Metalyx despite type resistance, while also keeping an eye for Chainite's inevitable attack.

But what came next wasn't something a mere Teleport could avoid.

"Now's our chance, Chainite!" Alain said, excitement growing in his voice. "Taunt on Gardevoir!"

Chainite grinned ferally as it made a "bring it" hand motion at Gardevoir. The Embrace Pokemon gritted its teeth and narrowed its eyes at Chainite, as a vein on its forehead bulged while a burning aura appeared around its body.

"Sorry, but no more teleporting around for you," Alain said, his wide grin matching that of his Pokemon, only far less sinister. "Now, let's release Metalynx! Crunch!"

Letting out an otherworldly roar, Chainite lunged forward, its black, shadowy jaws full of long, sharp black teeth wide open, ready to sink them into the Psychic and Fairy-type's tender flesh. Unable to just Teleport away, Gardevoir was forced to jump back in order to avoid the incoming bite, releasing its psychic hold on Metalynx.

"Great job Alain! This will make things so much easier!" Ash said, both he and his Pokemon reinvigorated by their current advantage. "Come on Metalynx, Iron Tail on Gardevoir! It won't be able to disappear this time!"

Metalynx turned around and pounced at Gardevoir while channeling power into her machete-like tail, which started to glow with a silvery light before swinging it at the Embrace Pokemon. Gardevoir, wide open from dodging Chainite's attack, was unable to avoid this attack and uselessly raised its arms in front of its face to block it. Needless to say, the super effective attack slammed her backwards.

"And follow up with Shadow Claw, Chainite!" Alain added.

Letting out an otherworldly screech, the Retribution Pokemon dashed towards the still reeling Gardevoir, with Metalynx stepping aside to let her partner a free way, and delivered a pair of slashing blows at the Psychic and Fairy-type Pokemon, who cried in pain as it was slammed against a metallic wall by the force of the attack.

"Gardevoir!" Alina cried, taking her hands to her head.

"Don't stop Chainite! Crunch on Sableye!" Alain ordered.

"Sableye, parry it with Punishment!" Anika shouted, her voice growing desperate.

Sableye held its giant gem as if it were a weapon, which started to glow with an amethyst light, and used it to block Chainite's biting attack. However, much to both the trainer and Pokemon's shock, Chainite's huge black fangs sunk into the gemstone. A spiderweb of cracks quickly spread around it, before it shattered in a thousand shards.

"S-SABLE!?" the bemused Sableye cried upon seeing its precious gemstone reduced to bits.

"This has to be a fucking joke!" Anika cried.

"Come on Metalynx, X-Scissor!" Ash said, throwing a punch forward.

"Meta!" Metalynx roared as she pounced at Sableye, her claws glowing with a greenish-yellow light. She delivered a pair of swipes in the shape of an X which blasted Sableye away, the force of the attack sent him crashing against Gardevoir.

Both Pokemon were slumped against each other and made no effort to get back on their feet. Then, as if to confirm their defeat, they reverted back to their base forms before the incredulous eyes of their trainers.

"We... we lost...?" Alina said, her voice sounding dazed, as she recalled Gardevoir.

"Yeah, you did! Now tell us what have you done with Alain's Charizard!" Ash demanded.

"Like hell we will!" Anika said as she recalled her defeated Sableye. She grabbed Alina by the wrist and started running in the opposite direction. "Come on sister-"

"META!"

Unfortunately for them, their escape was foiled by Metalynx leaping above them and cutting their way. The still Mega Evolved Pokemon

growled at them menacingly, showing her long, metallic fangs at the twins, who promptly took a step back on instinct.

"You aren't going anywhere," Alain stated. He was yelling, his voice was overflowing with fury. He grabbed a pokeball and tossed it at the twins' feet. "Tricwe, tie them up with String Shot!"

Upon coming out of the pokeball, the Shock Bug Pokemon shot a sticky thread from its tiny jaws, tying Alina and Anika together, just like Ash's Frosthra had done before with Zebos and Maury. Feeling like they weren't going anywhere, Ash decided to recall Metalynx.

"Good job, girl. Take a good rest," he whispered to the pokeball, before putting it back in his belt. He then noticed Alain walking towards the immobilized Team Omega Captains, a deep scowl on his face. "Alain?"

The taller boy ignored Ash. "If you two know what's good for you, you'll be telling us where is Charizard. Now."

"Go fuck yourself, pretty boy! We won't betray Team Omega!" Anika said, before spitting Alain in the face.

The Kalosian didn't seem to mind the gesture, merely wiping the saliva from his face with his sleeve. "If you don't want to talk the easy way, we'll do it the hard way then. Chainite?"

Chainite hissed menacingly as it brought a very sharp claw near Anika's face. The bravado immediately disappeared from the brown haired woman's face, gulping as the shadowy blades got close to her skin.

"Okay, okay, we'll talk!" it wasn't Anika, but her sister, the one to break. "The professor has your precious Charizard."

"Sister! What the actual fuck!" Anika shouted at her twin. "Why did you have to babble? These softies weren't going to hurt me for good!"

"Why do you care? It's not like they're going to defeat him. Not with the Pokemon he has," Alina said, sure of her choice.

"The... professor?" Ash repeated.

"He's the leader of our organization. And yes, he's still here, or so we think," Alina continued. "Aside from the Kalosian's Charizard, he wants that Greninja of yours, Kantonian, and won't stop until he gets his hands on him."

"So go and meet the professor. Try to fight him if you want, but with the Pokemon he has at his disposal you won't beat him," Anika said, glaring at both boys. "And all your Pokemon will be his."

"You also believed that we couldn't beat you, yet we proved you wrong. That professor of yours will follow the same fate as you," Alain stated.

"I admit that we underestimated you. Especially since we weren't expecting that you'd have a way to disable our Personal Shield Generators," Alina confessed, sounding a little regretful. "But between this fight and all the grunts that got in your way, your Pokemon teams must be pretty depleted. And while the Kantonian still has the Greninja, you no longer have your strongest Pokemon to rely on," the teal haired sister finished, shooting Alain a taunting grin.

Alain didn't say anything, he merely clenched his fists as his whole body trembled a little. As much as both boys didn't want to admit it, Alina was right. Greninja was Ash's only Pokemon who was still fresh, and all of Alain's Pokemon were either unable to battle or pretty close to collapsing.

Alas, fortune was about to smile upon them

"Ash! Alain!" a new voice said. Ash and Alain turned around, and saw Clemont running towards them. The inventor was red in the face, and once he stopped he started to heavily pant. It was obvious that the lemon blond had run all the way towards them, his lack of fitness

now taking a toll on such decision. "At... last... I... found you... huff..."

"Great, the four eyes is here too," Anika said, rolling her eyes.

"Hey, are those the Team Omega captains we fought against in Bealbeach City?" Clemont asked, adjusting his glasses. "You beat them? Great!"

"Clemont, we know where Alain's Charizard is. Apparently, it's in the clutches of the Team Omega boss," Ash told Clemont. He then added, "Clemont, did you have to fight many grunts to get here?"

"Uh... no. Everything was pretty empty. You guys did a good job clearing the way," Clemont complimented.

Ash paid no mind to the compliment, since his thoughts laid elsewhere. "So all your Pokemon must still be in top shape, right?"

"Er... yes? The four I still have on me, at least. Remember that I lent Bunnelby and Geigeroach to Bonnie when she left with the girls," Clemont reminded him.

"Good. In that case, you're coming with me. We need to find that Team Omega boss guy, and I'll feel better if I have you as backup," Ash told Clemont, before turning towards Alain. "Alain, you better stay here and make sure these two don't cause any problems until we're done here. Also make sure no one gets past this point."

As expected, Alain didn't take Ash's decision kindly. "What!? Ash, you cannot expect me to stay here all idle while Charizard is still in the hands of those criminals!"

"I know, I know!" Ash replied, holding his hands defensively, hoping to placate the taller boy. "If it was Pikachu the one needing rescue, everyone knows there would be no talking me down from finding him myself..."

"Piiika..." Pikachu moaned.

"But... as much as I hate to admit it, they're right," Ash said as his eyes briefly drifted to the twins bound by the String Shot. "Your Pokemon want to recover Charizard as much as you do, and they've been pushing themselves really far while fighting these criminals. So they might not be at the top of their game anymore, not after so many battles."

"Nonsense, my Pokemon can fight just fine!" Alain fired back.

"Come on Alain, I think Ash has a point," Clemont intervened, something Ash deeply appreciated. "We can't leave these two unsupervised, they're too dangerous."

"Yet why don't you stay here then?" Alain retorted, his scowl deepening.

"Unlike you, I barely had to send my Pokemon to fight since we arrived at this place, so they're almost completely fresh," Clemont began, meeting Alain's fiery gaze with one of his own. "Plus, one of my current Pokemon is capable of Mega Evolution, should the situation require it."

"Don't you think we'll have a better chance of getting Charizard back if Clemont continued with me instead of you?" Ash asked.

Ash's question was followed by a tense silence. The boy from Pallet hoped that Alain would see reason and stay here instead. With each second they wasted arguing, the chances of the Team Omega boss deciding that stealing Greninja is not worth the effort and leaving the place with Charizard grew.

Finally, with a defeated sigh, Alain's head slumped. "Fine," he said.

"Don't worry Alain. I promise you that I will bring Charizard back to you," Ash stated, his voice full of resolve, as his auburn eyes locked into Alain's blue ones.

Alain couldn't help but smile, if only a little. "And I believe you."

"Here, have this," Clemont said, giving Alain his own earpiece.
"Contact us if something happens."

"Got it," Alain said, putting on the earpiece. "Now go! And give those guys a beating on my behalf!"

"Don't worry, we will! Come on Clemont!"

Ash and Clemont left the hallway, leaving Alain alone to watch the defeated twins, hoping to find the Team Omega boss and rescue Alain's Charizard from his clutches...

Author's Note: Another chapter, another Team Omega admin (or admins) that go down. However, Alain's Charizard is still a no show, so the search for it continues. Unfortunatley for Alain, the match against the twins had exhausted most of his team, so now Clemont will be the one coming with Ash as they continue to search for the base.

Also, I remember that somebody said that Ash needed one Pokemon with Taunt so he'd stop that Gardevoir from Teleporting all the time. As you can see, that was the idea all along, albeit it was one of Alain's Pokemon who did the taunting. Then again, those two won't be going anywhere.

Thanks a lot to Fox McCloude, MarkusDarkus87 and MegaSalamence64 for reviewing past chapter, and special thanks to Viroro-kun for betareading this chapter, whose edits and suggestions made it so much better.

Next time, the conclusion to the Team Omega arc! In the meantime, don't forget to drop a review!

Omegageddon, Part III

Chapter 52:

Omegageddon, Part III

Team Omega Base, Route 16

"Come on guys, keep going!" Serena encouraged.

To say that things were chaotic would be an understatement. One moment, the girls were inspecting the holding pens inside the large storage room to check if Charizard was any of them, but alas they only found the perennially enraged Nuclear-type Pokemon.

Then, the cages and holding pens opened on their own, and all hell broke loose.

Fortunately, the girls were fast on the draw, and before the Nuclear Horde could pounce on them they were able to send some of their own Pokemon to form a defense: Serena sent Delphox and Pangoro, Decidueye and Vaporeon were Leona's picks, while Mairin chose Chespie and her white flower Florges nicknamed Bebe.

Bonnie didn't even need to send any Pokemon, as her brother's borrowed Bunnelby and Geigeroach were already outside.

A cacophony of roars, screeches and cries signaled the beginning of the battle as the mass of mindless radioactive Pokemon charged forward. Said charge failed to break the impregnable defense the non-Nuclear Pokemon (and Geigeroach) had put, for they made up for their lack of numbers with greater intelligence and their trainers coaching them.

The battle didn't end there, of course. Even if they were disorganized, the Nuclear Pokemon had the advantage of numbers, and they were going to capitalize on that for all that it was worth.

Delphox sent a wave of flames through her wand at a group of approaching Tancoon, forcing them back.

Several Owten and a pair of Eshouten dived from above towards Pangoro, who was busy punching an Arbok back with Thunder Punch. However, he was saved by a powerful Aurora Beam fired by Vaporeon.

Bunnelby fired globs of mud at an incoming Kinetmunk, while Decidueye delivered swipes with the edge of its wings, which were glowing green, to a pair of Baashaun leaping at it.

A pair of Gligar and a Palij crashed uselessly against Chespie's Spiky Shield, and were quickly dispatched by a powerful Needle Arm.

Bebe fired a Moonblast towards a Tubareel slithering towards it, while Geigeroach fired missiles of purple sludge at a group of Corsola.

"Come on guys, keep going, you're doing great!" Leona cheered.

"Pango?" Pangoro asked, as something began to crawl up his legs.

"Ches!" Chespie growled, sharing the panda's predicament.

Being the two largest Pokemon, the Nuclear Horde seemed to focus on Pangoro and Chespie more than anyone, as many smaller Nuclear Pokemon such as Chyinmunk, Costraw and Owten started to climb them while biting and scratching them.

"Bunnelby, quick! Help Pangoro with Double Slap!" Bonnie urged.

"I can help Chespie, but this might hurt a bit!" Leona asked Mairin, but the redhead nodded. "Decidueye, Leaf Storm over Chesnaught!"

"Chespie, hold on!" Mairin encouraged.

As Bunnelby slapped the crawling Pokemon away from Pangoro's large body with swiftness and precision, Decidueye flapped its wings, releasing a barrage of razor leaves at Chespie. The Chesnaught gritted its teeth as the attack washed over it, but the Nuclear Pokemon crawling over its body weren't able to take it as well as the Kalosian starter, and were blown away.

As the Nuclear Pokemon were eventually knocked out, the fight started to wind down, giving the Non-Nuclear Pokemon (and Geigeroach) more breathing room, which allowed them to finish the remaining hostile Pokemon off much more easily, with Bebe blasting the last group of enemies with a powerful Petal Dance.

"So... were those the last ones?" Leona asked.

"I think so. I don't see any more left..." Bonnie said, as she cautiously looked around.

"Still, we better get out of here before they send more through a secret tunnel or something like that," Serena said, who didn't want to risk staying in that trap any longer than necessary. "I think our Pokemon could take down that door if they work together. Perhaps Delphox could-"

Serena was interrupted by the cracking noise of a speaker coming to life.

"Good job with those Nuclear Pokemon, girls," an adult male voice boomed, coming from the roof. "The combat data that you so generously provided has been recorded. It will be worth millions!"

"Who the hell are you!?" Leona yelled at the speakers on the roof.

"That voice..." Serena began.

"Have you heard it before?" Mairin asked the honey blonde.

"It rings a bell, but now I can't put my finger where I have heard it before..." Serena replied.

"Yeah, I think I have heard that voice too, but I don't remember when," Bonnie added.

"But despite your generous contribution, I'm afraid that I cannot allow you to roam this base as freely as you've been doing," the voice continued.

There was a metallic noise, and the gate that had closed behind them, leaving them trapped inside the holding room began to open. Unfortunately, there were three Team Omega members of the kind that used Nuclear Pokemon, two grunts and another one Serena guessed was a higher up, given that his armor was way more elaborate.

"YOU!" Leona shouted, startling Serena. The Alolan was glaring daggers at the large Team Omega member in the middle.

"You know that guy?" Serena asked her rival.

"You bet I do! He and his friends were the one who ambushed and kidnapped me!" Leona stated.

"Now Captain Darren here will escort you back to your cells. Please behave like good girls and don't make his job harder than it needs to be," the voice from the speakers asked in a fake pleading tone, before chuckling and adding, "or not. Darren is a man who enjoys unleashing violence. The choice is yours."

"Don't worry professor. I'll teach them why messing with Team Omega can be harmful to your health," the Team Omega Captain, Darren, said while chuckling darkly. "So, I assume you aren't going to come quietly, are you?"

"If you think I'm going to let you get your hands on me a second time, you'll have another thing coming!" Leona fired.

"We aren't going to surrender without a fight," Serena defiantly added.

Darren brought his head back and laughed. "Heh, I like your grit, girlies! Though, one way or another, you are going to surrender! Gyarados, Pajay, go!"

"Nucleon, to battle!" the first grunt said.

"Let's go, Xenogen!" said the second grunt.

The four Nuclear Pokemon materialized in front of the girls, the Gyarados and the Pajay, wearing mind control collars, in the middle, with Xenogen and Nucleon, who fought for their masters seemingly out of free will if their bare necks were any indication, flanking the former two.

Despite the fact that the girls were fresh out of beating dozens of Nuclear Pokemon, all of them knew that these four alone would prove to be a much greater challenge to beat.

"Xenogen, Fallout!" one of the Team Omega grunts called.

"Oh no!" Mairin cried.

"Xeeeeee... !" Xenogen screeched, as its eerie green glow its body produced became more intense. It was quickly followed by the ground turning bright green, with wisps of green mist appearing and vanishing around them.

"Mairin? Do you know about that attack?" Serena asked.

The redhead nodded. "Yeah, it's Fallout. It spreads radiation all around the place for a time, slowly harming non-Nuclear Pokemon and increasing the overall resistance of Nuclear Pokemon."

"So things just got harder from us. Great way to start this battle," Leona commented, suppressing a groan.

"At least Geigeroach will benefit from it," Bonnie said, trying to stay positive.

"No matter what they do, we aren't going to let these guys intimidate us! Come on Delphox, Fire Blast! Make it big!"

"Del, delphox!" the Fox Pokemon cried, the flame of her wand burning brightly, before swinging it forward and releasing a huge torrent of flames shaped like kanji of fire.

"Pajay, Nuclear Wind!" Darren called.

Pajay didn't say anything, and began to flap its wings quickly, forming a tornado of green air. Both attacks clashed in the middle and struggled against one another for a few seconds, before both of them broke down into nothing, much to Serena's shock.

"What?" the honey blonde asked.

"Gyarados, Hydro Pump!" Darren ordered.

Like Pajay, Gyarados remained silent, as it simply opened its mouth and released a deluge of torrential water at Delphox, which hit both her and Pangoro, blasting them backwards.

"Delphox, Pangoro!" Serena cried.

"Decidueye, quickly, jump into the air and use Spirit Shackle!" Leona quickly ordered.

"Cover Decidueye with Mud Shot, Bunnelby!" Bonnie added just as quickly.

"Bun, bunel!" Bunnelby cried as he summoned several globs of mud around his ears before launching them forward with no direction in particular.

"Hooo!" Decidueye hooted as it took off, and using its wing as a makeshift bow, fired a small volley of arrow-shaped feathers coated

in ghostly flames.

"Dodge them, quickly!" Darren ordered.

While Pajay was able to move away from the incoming rain of mud missiles and ghostly arrows, Gyarados wasn't so lucky and took both attacks in full. Still, the Atrocious Pokemon didn't even cry in pain.

"Nucleon, Hype Voice!" one of the Team Omega grunts ordered.

"Nu-CLEEEEEEEEEEE!" Nucleon screamed, as its body glowed with a vibrant green glow, sparks of the same color jumping around it, as green destructive sound waves barreled from its mouth into Decidueye and Bunnelby, blasting them backwards.

"Hooo!"

"By!"

"Decidueye!" Leona cried, taking her hands to her head.

"Bunnelby, are you okay!?" Bonnie asked, worried.

"Such a powerful Hyper Voice! We better watch out for that Pokemon!" Mairin observed.

"That was no normal Hyper Voice! Nucleon's ability converts Normal-type moves into Nuclear-type ones and gives them a power boost!" Serena quickly explained. "So watch out for it!"

"Our turn, Xenogen! Proton Beam!" the other Omega Grunt ordered. "Aim for Delphox and Pangoro, don't let them get back on their feet!"

"Take the attack, Geigeroach!" Bonnie urged.

Radioactive particles began to gather in front of Xenogen, forming an orb of atomic power with green sparks jumping around it, before said energy was released in the form of a destructive energy wave that barreled towards Delphox and Pangoro, still getting back to their

feet. Fortunately for them, Geigeroach jumped in front of the attack, blocking it with his body.

"A noble action, little girl, but stupid!" the Team Omega grunt laughed.

Bonnie smirked confidently, placing her hands on her hips. "You think so?"

When the attack reached its end, Geigeroach was still there, none the worse to wear.

"What?" the grunt shouted, outraged.

"Now Geigeroach, counter with Leech Life!" Bonnie added, taking advantage of her enemy's bemusement.

"Geige!" Geigeroach cried in his clicking voice, dashing forward as his four forelegs were glowing with a greenish yellow aura.

"ROACH!"

The Radroach Pokemon thrust all his limbs into the Nuclear-type Pokemon's flesh, draining its vital force.

"Now's our turn to counterattack! Pangoro, Dark Pulse! Delphox, Psybeam!" Serena ordered.

"Gyarados, Radioacid! Pajay, Mirror Move on that Pangoro!" Darren ordered.

Delphox's eyes began to glimmer with all the color of the rainbow before firing a beam of psychic power of the same colors, while Pangoro cupped his paws before thrusting them forward, releasing a black and purple stream of destruction. Meanwhile, Gyarados expelled from its mouth a geyser of corrosive acid while Pajay fired from its open beak an identical stream of dark power as Pangoro.

The four attacks met in the middle, but unfortunately, it was Darren's Pokemon who had the upper hand as their attacks pushed Serena's

Pokemon's attack back.

"Vaporeon, join in with Bubble Beam!" Leona intervened.

"Va, vapo!" Vaporeon cried before firing a stream of bubble, helping Serena's Pokemon push back the Nuclear and Dark-type attacks back to their casters, exploding in their face before they had the chance to avert it.

Unfortunately for the girls, Darren's Pokemon didn't look that hurt.

"Normally an attack like that would have knocked out any Nuclear Pokemon. As long as the Fallout is active, we're at a disadvantage despite our bigger numbers," Serena inwardly realized. "Great timing Leona! Now we need to keep pressing on! Try to keep that Pajay distracted while I focus on the Gyarados. Pangoro, Thunder Punch! And Delphox, cover Pangoro with Flamethrower!"

"Vaporeon, another Bubble Beam, aim for Pajay!" the Alolain trainer offered.

"You're about to learn how huge is the gap between you and me! Pajay, dodge that Bubble Beam and block that Flamethrower with your body! Gyarados, catch that bear with Ice Fang!"

Pangoro dashed forward, paw clenched into a fist crackling with electricity while Delphox shot a stream of flames that sailed above him and Vaporeon spat a barrage of bubbles. However, in an admirable display of agility the Nuclear Pajay evaded the bubbles and intercepted the Flamethrower with its own body. Serena watched in shock how not only Delphox's attack didn't harm it in the slightest, but it caused it to glow with a blazing orange aura in a way that was familiar to Serena.

The honey blonde remembered Ash's match against Tiko, and she realized she had made a mistake. "Pangoro, wait-!"

"Too late!" Darren said with a cruel laugh, seemingly aware of the Kalosian's blunder.

Without Delphox's attack as cover, Gyarados was able to shift its body in order to dodge Pangoro's electricity-enhanced punches before shutting its frost-covered jaws over Pangoro's arm, freezing it almost instantly.

"Goooooooooooooooo... !" Pangoro roared in pain, struggling to pull his frozen arm from the tight jaws of the Nuclear-type beast.

"Pangoro, hold on! Delphox, help Pangoro!" Serena pleaded.

"Don't let them, Pajay! Keep them at bay with Nuclear Wind!" Darren mercilessly ordered. "And Gyarados, smash Pangoro against the ground!"

Pajay began to flap its wings as fast as it could, producing a sickly green tornado empowered by the Fallout, forcing the rest of the Pokemon back while Gyarados lifted Pangoro into the air before slamming him against the hard, metallic ground, producing a loud, reverberating noise. Tiny ice shards were flown everywhere as the ice that covered almost half of Pangoro's body shattering on contact.

"Pangoro!"

After bouncing twice on his back against the hard iron ground, Pangoro landed at Serena's feet. He made an attempt to get back on his feet, but lacked the strength to do so.

"P-Pa..."

"Pangoro!" Serena cried a second time as she kneeled to check her defeated Pokemon.

"Ohhhh, you're SO going pay for that!" Leona said, as she struck a pose. "Decidueye, get ready!"

"Hoo!" the archer owl hooted as it landed in front of her, ready to attack.

She began to move her arms and body in a series of poses. "Now Decidueye, Bloom Do-oh crap!" she said in realization, breaking the last pose and noticing her currently bare wrist. "I forgot I no longer have my Z-Ring..."

"Hoo... !" Decidueye hooted sadly, looking back at his trainer.

"Don't worry Leona. Z-move or not, this fight is far from over," Serena said, as she returned Pangoro to his pokeball before clipping it to her belt and picking a second one. "Go Oblivicorn!"

The pokeball opened upon touching the ground, releasing Serena's formerly disobedient mare.

Oblivicorn neighed loudly, raising over her back legs while waving her front hooves in an act of defiance.

"Not a bad Pokemon, girlie, but still not enough to beat me! No little girl who has never seen what real combat is like will ever be close to defeating me!" Darren said full of confidence.

"We'll see about that! Oblivicorn, Charge Beam!" Serena commanded, throwing a hand forward.

Oblivicorn's front horn was layered in crackling electricity, before launching a yellow lightning bolt at the Water and Nuclear Pokemon type.

"Pajay, block it with Heat Wave!" the Team Omega captain ordered.

His Nuclear Pajay flapped its wings, blowing a gust of blazing orange wind. The scorching winds and the electrical bolt met in the middle, resulting in a small explosion.

"Now Sudden Strike!" Serena quickly said. "Delphox, cover her with Psybeam! Don't worry about hitting Oblivicorn!"

Oblivicorn neighed again, her body glowing with a dark aura before barreling forward, leaving behind a fading trail of shadows, while Delphox fired from her eyes a beam of light with all the colors of the rainbow. Pajay was unable to move away in time to avoid Oblivicorn slamming her body's full weight against the nuclear bird, followed by said bird being blasted into Gyarados by the psychic energy stream courtesy of Delphox.

"Bring those Pokemon down, you two!" Darren ordered his subordinates.

"Nucleon, Swift on that Oblivicorn!" one of the Team Omega grunts ordered.

"Nu, nucleon!" the non-mind controlled Nuclear Pokemon cried in a distorted voice, its body glowing once again bright green as sparks of the same color jumped around it, as it jumped and swung its floating tail detached from its body, releasing a flurry of green glowing stars that homing onto Oblivicorn.

"Xenogen, Sludge, same target!" the other grunt added.

Bulges appeared and moved on Xenogen's organic tubes as something flowed through them, before opening its tentacled mouth and releasing a wave of purple toxic muddy substance.

"Chespie, protect Oblivicorn with Spiky Shield!" Mairin was quick to order.

"Che, chesnaught!" Chespie cried, placing itself in front of its teammate and slammed its fists, producing a green shield of glowing energy with spikes protruding from it.

The barrage of nuclear star-shaped missiles crashed uselessly against the defensive construct, nullifying the attack. Unfortunately, the moment it did the shield disappeared, and Chespie was hit by the Sludge, covering it in grime. A cry of pain came from the Chesnaught upon being struck by the super effective attack.

"Chespie, no!" Mairin cried.

"Delphox, Flamethrower!" Serena shouted. "In a wide arc!"

"Del!" the Fox Pokemon cried, motioning her wand in a horizontal motion, releasing a torrent of flames in a wide arc.

While Nucleon and Pajay were able to gracefully dodge the destructive attack, the definitely less mobile Gyarados and Xenogen were not, the latter Pokemon crying in pain upon taking the powerful move.

"Oblivicorn, Horn Attack on that Xenogen! Don't let it take any time to breathe!" Serena said, her eyes burning with anger.

Oblivicorn neighed once again, and charged towards Xenogen at a superb speed, lowering her head so her frontal horn, now glowing with a pure white light, was aligned with the Mutant Pokemon. Xenogen was unable to move in time and let out a screech of pain once the empowered horn sunk into its soft flesh, the resistance boost provided by the Fallout proving to be insufficient in order to dull the power of Oblivicorn's attack, and collapsed.

"Xenogen! Oh, shit!" the Team Omega grunt cursed upon seeing his Pokemon taken out by the Horn Attack.

"Gyarados, Radioacid again!" Darren shouted, unconcerned with his side having one Pokemon less.

"Chespie, quickly, Spiky Shield!" Mairin said.

Once again, Gyarados regurgitated a geyser of glowing green corrosive liquid, showering both Delphox and Chespie. Unfortunately for Mairin, the command came too late and the Spiny Armor Pokemon was unable to call for the defensive move. The acid made a high pitched hissing noise as it burned the flesh of Delphox and Chespie, plumes of green smoke produced as a result.

"Phox..."

"Ches... !"

Both Pokemon cried weakly before collapsing, the Nuclear-type move having made a number on them.

"Chespie!" Mairin cried.

"Delphox!" Serena wailed.

The honey blonde then felt one her pokeballs wiggle on its own, before opening up and releasing its occupant, Syrentide.

"Sy, syren!" Syrentide cried as she worriedly rushed towards Delphox. She held the fox's head with one hand. "Sy?"

"D-Del..." Delphox managed to say, before falling to unconsciousness.

Syrentide gasped in shock, before fixing Darren and his Pokemon with a piercing glare.

"This is our chance now that they're down, Nucleon! Half-Life!" the other Omega grunt ordered.

"Don't let them, Vaporeon! Counter with Aurora Beam! And Decidueye, help with Leaf Blade!" Leona quickly ordered.

As Nucleon fired a string of green glowing rings of radioactive energy towards Syrentide and the fallen Delphox and Chespie. Fortunately, Vaporeon was able to intercept the attack by firing a prismatic colored beam from her mouth. Both attacks clashed, producing a multicolored explosion.

"Hoo, hoo!"

And from the smoke of said explosion emerged one angry Decidueye, the edges of its wings glowing green, as it delivered a

pair of powerful swipes at the startled Atomic Pokemon.

"Wild Charge, Bunnelby!" Bonnie ordered, yelling loud enough for her voice to be heard above the cacophony of noises.

Nucleon barely had time to react before Bunnelby, body covered in crackling yellow lightning, slammed into the Eeveelution with the force of a speeding train, blasting the Nuclear-type Pokemon backwards, crashing against a metallic wall and falling down with a thud.

"Nucleon!" its trained yelled, taking his hands to his head.

"Pajay, Heat Wave on those weaklings!" Darren ordered.

Pajay began to flap its wings, blowing gusts of burning hot orange air that washed over the three Pokemon, which had neither the time nor the room to dodge. And while Vaporeon was able to endure the attack thanks to its type resistance, Bunnelby and especially Decidueye weren't so lucky.

"Bunnelby!" Bonnie cried after seeing the rabbit's body covered in burnt marks.

"Decidueye, no!" Leona wailed upon seeing her starter Pokemon collapse.

Darren looked at his pair of minions recalling their defeated Pokemon and clicked his noise in a disapproving fashion. "It seems I just can't rely on you guys to do your jobs, can I? Get out of my sight! I'll finish the job myself!"

The grunts didn't say anything, merely running out of the place, leaving their boss alone with the four girls.

"Oh, so you plan to take on all of us on your own, big guy?" Leona asked mockingly, as she recalled her Decidueye.

"Sure you may have taken down some of our Pokemon, but there's still plenty of fight in us!" Mairin hotly added. Behind her, Bonnie and Geigeroach pulled Bunnelby back, hopefully to keep him away from the battle while he was unable to fight himself.

"Exactly Like this little guy over here! Go, Cocancer!" Leona said, tossing a pokeball forward, which opened releasing the massive Beach Pokemon.

"There won't be any, once I do this," the girls could almost see Darren grin menacingly behind his helmet, as he pressed a button on his gauntlet. Said gauntlet opened up, revealing a marble-sized, rainbow colored object with the picture of a helix inside.

At the same time, a small compartment opened up on the Nuclear Gyarados' mind control collar, revealing another marble, this one red, blue and yellow.

Serena paled. She knew what those items were.

"N-Nuclear Pokemon can't Mega Evolve, right?" Mairin, who had also lost almost all color on her face, asked. Much to her horror, she had also guessed what was going to happen. "Right!?"

"You think they can't?" Darren cackled. "In that case, watch this and weep in despair! Come on Gyarados, let me bring out your true power, and bring devastation of the likes that has never been seen before! Mega Evolve!"

Tendrils of light shot from both the Keystone and the Megastone, merging together and linking trainer and Pokemon. For the first time since it was sent out of the pokeball, the Nuclear Gyarados roared as the transformation took effect, making its body larger and bulkier. The light dispelled followed by the helix of Mega Evolution flashing briefly, allowing the girls to see the fearsome form of a Mega Evolved Nuclear Pokemon.

"The power of Mega Evolution, and the unrivaled might of the Nuclear-type, brought together into a single Pokemon by the genius of the professor!" Darren boasted. "Come on Gyarados, show them the true depths of your power! Hydro Pump!"

The Mega Evolved Pokemon reared its head back before exhaling a massive deluge of water from its open jaws, its scale so big Serena feared it might flood the entire area.

Oblivicorn, Geigeroach, Vaporeon and Bebe the Florges were able to move away to dodge it, but sadly Syrentide and Cocancer were hit by the attack, blasting them backwards.

"Syrentide!" Serena cried.

"Cocancer, hold on!" Leona encouraged, before her eyes fixed on her other Pokemon. "Vaporeon, Aurora Beam!"

"Bebe, use Moonblast!" Mairin ordered.

Vaporeon once again fired a prismatic beam of freezing power from its mouth, while Bebe formed a swirly pink and white orb of energy before launching it forward.

Darren wasn't worried. "Repel those attacks with Nuclear Wind, Pajay!"

Flapping its wings once again, Pajay formed a tornado of sickly green wind. Both the cold ray of light and the pink and white orb crashed against the barrier of noxious winds, exploding uselessly without breaking through it.

"Now Gyarados, Radioacid!" Darren ordered.

"Block it, Geigeroach!" Bonnie quickly ordered.

From Gyarados mouth shot a geyser of corrosive green acid, and like the Hydro Bomb, it was much larger than before. The Radroach

Pokemon jumped into the attack, only partially blocking it, letting some smaller streams skip past his body.

"Oblivicorn, Sudden Strike, now!" Serena ordered. "And Syrentide, Ice Beam into the Pajay!"

Oblivicorn neighed loudly, her body glowing with a black aura before barreling towards Gyarados, leaving a trail of fading darkness behind it, while Syrentide fired a beam of chilling power at Pajay. The Nuclear bird gracefully dodged it, only getting its wing graced, but Gyarados wasn't so lucky, its Radioacid being interrupted the moment Oblivicorn slammed into its body hornfirst.

"Yes! Time to attack, Geigeroach! Sludge Wave!" Bonnie said with enthusiasm.

Taking advantage of Gyarados' predicament, Geigeroach fired multiple globs of purple sludge, all of them crashing into Gyarados, leaving it covered in grime.

"I'm getting tired of that insect! Pajay, get rid of him with Brave Bird!" Darren ordered.

After taking a little altitude, Pajay spread its wings, surrounded itself with a light blue aura and dived towards Geigeroach, leaving a trail of fading afterimages behind.

"Geigeroach, watch out!" Bonnie warned.

Unfortunately, the Radroach Pokemon wasn't fast enough to get out of the way, the Flying-type move hitting him with the force of a speeding train.

"R-Rooooo... !" Geigeroach cried, as he was launched backwards by the force of the attack, landing painfully on his back. "Ge... gei... !"

"Geigeroach!" Bonnie cried, as she rushed to check her borrowed Pokemon.

Serena gritted her teeth. As much as she wished otherwise, the honey blonde knew Geigeroach wasn't going to get up from that attack.

The time of caution was over. Now it was time to go all out.

"Syrentide! No more holding back!" Serena said, touching the keystone on her ring. "Now, let me help you bring out the potential that hides deep within you! Mega Evolve!"

As it happened before, tendrils of light shot from both the Keystone and the Mega Stone, merging and linking the Pokemon together. Once the bond was formed, Syrentide's body glowed with a bright light as it changed and grew. The fading light and the helix of Mega Evolution briefly flashing in front of the Pokemon marked the end of the transformation.

"So, you can Mega Evolve? Ha! That makes this fight all the better!" Darren said, cackling arrogantly. It looked like he was about to order his Pokemon to attack, but then stopped. "Say... that Syrentide was the Selkid you took from Zebos' brat, isn't it? She looks really strong. Not gonna lie, you raised her well."

"I'm almost tempted to say 'thank you'," Serena sarcastically replied.

"I'm the one who should be thanking you, girl. With how strong she is, she will sell for way more money than when she was a freshly caught Selkid," the Team Omega captain pointed out.

"You assume you're going to take her back. And such a thing won't happen as long as I'm here. Syrentide is with me now, and she won't be taken anywhere against her will!" Serena declared, her voice full of resolve.

"Sy, syren!" Syrentide emphatically agreed.

"We'll see about that, then! Gyarados, Thunderbolt on that Syrentide!" Darren ordered.

"Serena, quickly! Have her hide behind Cocancer!" Leona quickly suggested.

Seeing the logic behind her advice, Serena nodded. "You heard her, Syrentide!"

As Gyarados's frontal crest began to crackle with blue electricity, Leona's Cocancer placed itself in front of the Mega Evolved Nuclear-type Pokemon while Syrentide quickly hid behind the Beach Pokemon. The Thunderbolt was fired, but it crashed uselessly against the Grass and Ground-type Pokemon.

"That was a big mistake! Come on Pajay, Nuclear Wind!" Darren ordered, clenching a single fist.

"Counter it with Fairy Wind, Oblivicorn!" Serena replied.

"Fairy Wind you too, Bebe!" Mairin added.

Once again, Pajay blew a windstorm of radioactive air towards the Pokemon in front of it. However, Oblivicorn waved her front horn while Bebe did the same with its arms, creating twin tornadoes of pink sparkling wind. The two identical Fairy-type attacks merged together into a single, bigger faerie storm, clashing against the radioactive wind and stopping it on its tracks.

"Ice Fang on that Cocancer, Gyarados!" Darren ordered.

"Don't move and take the attack with Crabhammer!" Leona replied.

"Coca, can!" Cocancer replied, clacking its pincers menacingly.

Gyarados opened its mouth wide, chilling mist pouring from it as its sharp teeth were layered in even shaper ice, the two upper fangs growing much longer, and lunged at the crustacean. Cocancer raised its massive pincers, clacking it a couple times before they were covered in a cloak of torrential water, and closed around the frozen fangs before they could touch it.

"Yes! Now, Giga Drain!" Leona said, pumping her fist.

The sole palm tree growing on Cocancer's back glowed with an emerald light, as it extended towards Gyarados as if it was a tentacle, wrapping itself around Gyarados' thick neck. Small glowing orbs of the same color flowed from Gyarados into Cocancer as the former's life force was slowly transferred into the latter.

And while clever, Leona's maneuver would prove to be a mistake.

"Radioacid!" Darren ordered, his voice without mercy.

"No! Cocancer-"

Being that close, poor Cocancer had no chance to evade the deadly spray of corrosive acid that fell all over its body. Its hold on Gyarados was swiftly broken, as it squirmed backwards, enduring the excruciating pain as best as it could.

"Cocancer, are you okay!?" Leona asked in worry. Cocancer appeared to still be capable of fighting, though that attack must have taken quite a chunk of its vitality. "Fall back and heal yourself with Synthesis!"

Cocancer was eager to follow that command, as it crawled backwards and tried to heal itself using the artificial light of the chamber as fuel for the move.

"Syrentide, Hyper Voice!" Serena called.

"Syyy..." Syrentide began, her body shimmering with a pink light as sparks of the same color crackled around her. "TIIIIIIIIIIIIIDE!"

The Siren Pokemon opened her mouth, releasing powerful pink-tinted soundwaves at both Gyarados and Pajay. The bird was blasted backwards by the power of Syrentide's voice, but Gyarados managed to hold on.

"Gyarados, Thunderbolt! Now that she doesn't have that crab to act as a living shield!" Darren ordered. "Pajay, get behind Gyarados and use Roost!"

As Pajay went to hide behind its partner in order to recover its health, Gyarados prepared to counterattack. Despite being subjected to a very powerful move, Gyarados was still able to ignore the pain - or more likely, the mind control collar forced it to act despite the pain - and once again channeled a blue electric blast through its head crest. This time the attack connected.

"S-Syyyy... !" Syrentide cried, the harm of the super effective move forcing her to interrupt her own move.

"I'm sure you have noticed another advantage my Pokemon have over yours. Pain won't deter them from fighting at their best! No matter how much you hurt them, you will never force them to back down!" Darren proudly boasted.

"Pokemon are more than living weapons, you brute!" Mairin shouted at him.

"Yeah, how can you be so proud of all the suffering your Pokemon go through?" Bonnie chided as well, while holding Dedenne protectively between her hands. She went to whisper something to the Antennae Pokemon that Serena couldn't hear, perhaps some words to soothe the no doubt distressed Pokemon.

"Pokemon only exist to the benefit of their human masters! That's why we issue the orders and they follow them! Even your own Pokemon do that, so don't go lecturing me!" Darren heatedly replied. "Gyarados, another Thunderbolt on that Syrentide!"

"Counter with Ice Beam!" Serena replied.

Once again, Gyarados' crest crackled with blue electricity before releasing it in the form of a powerful lightning bolt, while Syrentide opened her mouth, forming a white glowing orb of cold energy that

exploded into a freezing beam. The attacks clashed in the middle, producing an explosion of white mist, ice shards and electric sparks.

"Now Oblivicorn, Sudden Strike!" Serena quickly ordered.

Oblivicorn neighed in agreement, galloping forward as fast as she could, her body surrounded by a dark purple aura that left a trail of light of the same color.

"Not so fast! Pajay, use Mirror Move to copy Ice Beam and fire it on the ground!" Darren said.

Pajay, already recovered with Roost, flew from behind Gyarados and fired a freezing beam from its open beak, covering the ground below it under a thin sheet of ice. Unfortunately, the moment Oblivicorn put her hooves on the ice she lost her balance and crashed against the cold ground in a rather painful way.

"Oblivicorn!" Serena cried.

"Finish off that pitiful mare with Ice Fang, Gyarados!" Darren ordered.

Gyarados wasted no time and lunged at the fallen equine with its jaws wide open, cold mist pouring from them and its teeth covered in sharp ice.

"Vaporeon, protect Oblivicorn with Aqua Tail!" Leona ordered.

"Pore!" Vaporeon cried as it dashed towards the coming Gyarados, its tail quickly coated in a cloak of swirling water. It jumped and slapped the coming Gyarados with its water-coated appendage, managing to break the nuclear monster's momentum.

"Pajay, Heat Wave!" Darren ordered.

"Counter with Hydro Pump, Syrentide!" Serena replied.

As Pajay blew a gust of scorching wind so hot it instantly evaporated the ice it had previously created with the copied Ice Beam, Syrentide exhaled a massive deluge of torrential water from her open mouth. The two attacks clashed, resulting in a loud hiss followed by a cloud of steam, before the Siren Pokemon's water move broke through the fire one. Sadly it didn't reach Pajay, who flew out of range.

"Now Bebe, Petal Blizzard!" Mairin shouted, her voice growing increasingly nervous.

"And Cocancer, Stone Edge!" Leona followed, who unlike Mairin still sounded energetic.

"Floooo... !" Florges cried, spreading its arms wide while summoning a tornado of pink petals around itself, before thrusting its arms forward, directing the attack in said direction.

"Co, cancer!" Cocancer growled, slamming one of its massive pincers on the ground, producing a row of consecutive rising stone pillars.

"Pajay, use Nuclear Wind! Gyarados, Radioacid!" Darren said, his confidence unwavering.

The radioactive tornado blown by the Nuclear-type bird clashed against the storm of petals, both attacks nullifying each other, while a geyser of corrosive acid expelled from Gyarados' mouth pretty much melted the stone pillars before they could reach either Pokemon.

Leona frowned upon seeing her attack countered so easily, while Mairin whimpered a little, covering her mouth with her hands.

"You don't get it, do you? The outcome of this battle was decided the moment it began! You have already lost! No matter what you do, no matter how many Pokemon you throw at me, you will never beat me! I am the fortress of Team Omega, a fortress that you will never breach!" Darren boasted.

"That's what you think, you big meanie!" Bonnie said, not intimidated in the slightest by the large man. "Dedenne, now, use Nuzzle!"

"Nenene!" Dedenne cried from atop the Gyarados' head. He began rubbing one of his cheeks until it generated electric sparks, before nuzzling said cheek against the Water and Nuclear-type Mega Evolved Pokemon.

While the attack didn't harm Gyarados' much, it left the Mega Evolved Pokemon paralyzed.

"NO!" Darren yelled, taking his hands to his head. "How... when did that stupid rat climb Gyarados?"

"Dedenne is small and not as strong as a big Pokemon, but it also makes him hard to spot!" Bonnie said, picking up the Antennae Pokemon after climbing Gyarados down and running back to her. "I whispered him to sneak up on your Gyarados while you were distracted fighting the other Pokemon!"

"If your Gyarados wasn't mind controlled, it would have noticed Dedenne climbing up its body," Serena interceded, a smirk of satisfaction adorning her lips. Now that Dedenne had impaired Gyarados, victory was at hand. "You yourself said it, nothing will distract your Pokemon from following your orders, didn't you?"

"Shut up, you brat! Gyarados, Hydro Pump! Wash them away!" Darren heatedly called.

But it seems that luck wasn't on his side, as Gyarados fell prey to a series of spams as it tried to use the attack, while yellow sparks crackled around its body.

"Everybody, time to strike! Syrentide, Hyper Voice! Oblivicorn, Charge Beam!"

"Bebe, Petal Blizzard once again!" Mairin joined Serena.

"Pajay, stop those attacks with Nuclear Wind, quickly!" Darren ordered, panic seeping into his voice.

"Oh no, you won't! Cocancer, launch Vaporeon into the air with Stone Edge! And Vaporeon, Bubble Beam from above!" Leona intervened.

As Pajay flapped its wings to prepare the Nuclear-type move, Vaporeon was jettisoned into the air by a stone column bursting from under its feet. Once above the target, the Bubble Jet Pokemon righted its body in order to be aligned with Pajay, and fired a stream of bubbles down. The attack connected, the watery explosions pushing Pajay down and preventing it from completing the move.

As this happened, Syrentide let out a loud scream, her powerful voice manifesting into pink tinted soundwaves, while Oblivicorn fired a single electric beam from her horn and Bebe summoned yet another tornado of petals. The three attacks struck the defenseless Gyarados, which on top of the damage it had taken over the course of the battle pushed its resistance over its limit, and collapsed to the ground with a deafening boom, returning to its base form.

"And Crabhammer on that Pajay before it can recover!" Leona ordered.

Before Pajay could take off into the air it was smashed by one of Cocancer's pincers, coated in torrential water. The attack was enough to knock the lights out of the Nuclear-type bird, which fell next to its defeated partner.

"What the... my... my perfect Pokemon... how could they have lost to the likes of you!" the defeated Omega captain asked in disbelief.

"That's what you get for underestimating us!" a vindicated Mairin said.

"Shit, better get out of-AH!" Darren had already turned back to run away, but Oblivicorn and Vaporeon were faster and quickly cut his

escape.

"I'm afraid not," Serena said, her voice being like ice. "You aren't going to leave. You're going to be a good boy and stay put here until the Rangers come to take you to a nice, cozy cell. But until that happens, there are a few questions that we'd like to ask you."

"For starters," Leona said, angrily stomping towards the no longer boastful and confident Team Omega member. "Where is the Charizard from the tall boy you captured alongside Mairin. And what have you done with my Z-Ring!"

Then, much to their surprise, Darren smirked.

"Both questions have the same answer," he said.

...

As the girls interrogated the defeated Darren, Ash and Clemont continued their trip through the underground base. From time to time they would encounter a couple of Team Omega grunts who would try to hinder their progress, but the pair of teens would easily sweep them away.

"Alright, according to the base's blueprints, we should be reaching the office of the Team Omega boss soon," Clemont said as he ran behind Ash.

"Good. We'll make sure he gives back Alain's Charizard and Mega Ring, as well as Leona's Z-Ring," Ash said with a nod. "And if he doesn't have them, he'll know where they are."

"Still, if this guy is anything like Lysandre, I doubt he'll comply without putting up resistance," Clemont reminded Ash. "How many Pokemon do you have left?"

"I had to send Dunseraph away to carry Zebos and his son to a ranger station, Frosthra is out, while Splendifowl, Metalynx and

Archilles are pretty exhausted. So far, only Greninja is fresh. What about you?"

"I lent Bunnelby and Geigeroach to Bonnie, but I still have the other four," Clemont said, as both he and Ash crossed an automatic door. "Do you think that will be enough?"

"Oh, I can assure you, it won't be," a new voice said.

Both boys abruptly stopped. Upon crossing the previous door they found themselves inside a very large and spacious hallway. And in the middle of said hallway there was a middle aged man with opaque glasses dressed like a scientist. A man both Ash and Clemont already met, though Ash didn't remember who this guy was supposed to be.

"Professor Larkspur...?" Clemont asked, visibly confused. "What... what are you doing here?"

Oh, so that's who it was.

"Have you been kidnapped by Team Omega too?" the lemon blond boy asked.

Larkspur merely chuckled. "Kidnapped? Come on Clemont, you are an intelligent boy. Does it look like I'm a prisoner?" he asked, spreading his arms to the sides.

"If you're not a prisoner..." Ash began, his expression darkening. "Then... you work for Team Omega!?"

"Pikaaaa!" Pikachu shouted, sharing his trainer's indignation.

"Yes, but not exactly. I don't work for Team Omega, Team Omega works for me. I founded it and led it," Larkspur explained.

"You... you're the Team Omega leader!?" Clemont shouted, sounding more disbelieving rather than angry, as if he refused to accept what the balding man had told him. "But... why!? You're the

most respected Pokemon Professor in the region! Why are you doing this!? Why do you throw your lot with scumbags who hurt people and Pokemon so much!?"

"Clemont, you're a smart boy, so answer me this: Pokemon can do so many amazing things we can only dream of: immense strength and speed, control over the elements, manipulating nature, hell, even sometimes warping reality itself! And look at us, little more than hairless apes, powerless to do even a fraction of what the weakest of Pokemon can accomplish," the evil scientist began, seemingly ignoring Clemont's question. "Yet we're the ones ruling the world. Do you know why?"

"Because we're more intelligent?" Clemont replied, frowning.

"Exactly!" Larkspur suddenly shouted, clapping his hands once. "Pokemon could have wiped us out a long time ago, but not only did we avoid extinction, but we managed to turn the tables on them; thanks to our superior intellect we made them into our servants, and use their amazing power to our benefit.

"Because, in the end, despite their superior power, we're the ones in charge. Pokemon only exist to serve mankind. To bring us to new heights. To advance our civilization," Larkspur gradiosely said.

"That's what Team Omega does. We're forced to act outside the law, because the people in charge are mentally weak pusillanimous who refuse to see the truth. But soon, once we recover the peak of our work, people won't have no choice but to agree with-"

"Oh, shut up already! Do you have any idea how many people like you I have met?" Ash interrupted the professor. "You're all the same; claiming that you act in the service of some grand purpose, but in the end you're only criminal scum hurting other people and Pokemon for their own benefit. Your little game ends now. I know you have Alain's Charizard, so now give it back!"

A scowl developed on the older man's face as one hand reached for a pocket inside his lab coat. "I see. I thought I could convince you to

join me, but I see that I'm wasting my time. Do you want your friend's Charizard so badly? Come and get it!"

Pulling his hand out of his pocket, Ash saw that the evil professor was holding a pokeball, which he tossed to the ground. When the capture device opened, it released Alain's Charizard.

Except that he was wearing the same mind control collar carried by the Omega grunts' Nuclear Pokemon.

If they wanted Alain's Charizard, they'll have to fight it.

Ash didn't seem perturbed by this development. "Oh, trust me, we will!" the Kantonian said, pokeball in hand. "Greninja, I choose you!"

"Electruxo, go!" Clemont said, mimicking Ash.

Both water-type starters materialized in front of their trainers, taking a battle stance. Greninja's focus, however, was broken upon seeing Charizard, or more specifically, its current state and the fact that it was fighting for somebody who wasn't its trainer.

"G-Gre...?" Greninja asked, looking at Ash in confusion.

"That evil man stole Charizard from Alain and made it his slave," Ash explained to Greninja. "I need you to free Charizard so he can be reunited with his legitimate trainer!"

"Gre, ninja!" Greninja nodded, and turned his eyes back to the Charizard.

"Two versus one? Not a very fair fight, isn't it?" Larkspur said, as he pulled another pokeball from his lab coat. "Let's even things out! Come out, Garlikid!"

"WHAT!?" both Ash and Clemont yelled at once.

And indeed, from the second pokeball emerged the Hero Pokemon. However, Garlikid had none of the energy it had displayed the first

time they saw it, carrying itself in a rigid manner that reminded them of a zombie.

Of course, the culprit was the same mind control collar Charizard was wearing around the Grass and Fighting-type's neck.

"Surprised?" Larkspur asked with a taunting grin, savoring the teen boys' reaction. "I'm not going to lie, this little guy really put up a fierce battle once we tracked it down. But in the end, it fell down to us, just like you two will fall down as well. Charizard, Dragon Claw! Garlikid, Drain Punch!"

Charizard flapped its wings once in order to rise into the air before diving forward, a bright green aura surrounding its claws and extending them, while Garlikid dashed in the same direction, one glowing punch raised.

"Greninja, parry that Dragon Claw with Night Slash!" Ash ordered.

"And Electruxo, stop Garlikid with Mist!" Clemont followed.

As Charizard reached Greninja, the Flame Pokemon brought its empowered claw down on the frog, but it only struck a sword made of dark power generated by the Ninja Pokemon. Meanwhile, Electruxo exhaled a stream of white fog towards the coming Garlikid, engulfing it inside a white cloud, forcing the Legendary Pokemon to stop due to losing visibility.

"Well done! Now Aqua Jet on Charizard!" Clemont said.

As Greninja and Charizard pushed their attacks against each other, Electruxo barreled towards the latter, his whole body cloaked in torrential water, before slamming into the Kantonian Starter, pushing it back.

"Garlikid, dispel that mist with a Mach Punch to the ground, and then use Stone Edge!" the professor barked.

There was a loud boom followed by swishing noise, and the cloud Garlikid was inside was quickly blown away by the wind displaced with the punch to the ground, revealing the Hero Pokemon with its cape billowing behind it. The Legendary Pokemon then stomped on the floor once, generating a row of rising stone columns against Greninja and Electruxo.

"Greninja, Double Team!" Ash called.

"Gree-NINJA!" Greninja cried, as the hallway was filled with copies of the Ninja Pokemon. The Stone Edge dispelled a few, but many of them remained.

"Charizard, fly above them and dispel those copies with Flamethrower in a wide arc!" Professor Larkspur ordered.

Charizard hovered above them once again, and exhaled a powerful stream of flames from one side to another, quickly eliminating all the fakes.

"Quickly Greninja, now that it's wide open! Water Shuriken!" Ash told him.

"Gre, gren!" Greninja croaked, extending both arms, four-pointed watery stars appearing on each webbed hand, before throwing them towards Charizard, who was busy dispelling the last duplicates.

"Now Garlikid, strike that Greninja with Drain Punch!" Larkspur impatiently shouted.

"Don't let it, Electruxo! Stop it with Electroweb!" Clemont quickly interceded.

As the pair of water shuriken flew towards Charizard, Garlikid dashed towards Greninja, one of its fists glowing with a green swirly aura.

"Ele, trux!" Electruxo cried, shooting a sphere of yellow lightning from his mouth towards Greninja.

The moment the electrical orb was close, it exploded into a web of electricity that trapped Garlikid inside a tangle of threads made of lightning, causing Garlikid to trip and fall to the ground facefirst. Meanwhile, the Water Shuriken squaredly hit Charizard.

"And Aerial Ace! Use the Stone Edge as a springboard!" Ash shouted.

"Nin!" Greninja nodded, leaping onto one of the stone pillars before jumping a second time, reaching above Charizard while cupping both hands, which were glowing a bright white, reeling them backwards before slamming them into Charizard's skull, knocking the lizard out of the air and smashing it into the ground.

"What... what the hell's going on!?" Larkspur protested. "How is your Greninja dominating Charizard like that!? Your Greninja has never been able to beat this Charizard!"

"That's an easy question: because that's not Alain's Charizard, but a sad shadow of its true self. There's only one trainer capable of bringing out all the potential that Pokemon has, the same trainer who raised that Charizard into what it's today from a much weaker Pokemon," Ash explained, anger seeping into each word that left his lips. "And said trainer it's not you!"

"Sure, you might have turned both Charizard and Garlikid into your puppets, but in the end, that's what they are, mere puppets!" Clemont joined Ash in his scolding of the Team Omega leader. "They stand no chance against real Pokemon!"

"Oh, you think so?" Larkspur asked, barely keeping his growing anger in check. "In that case, I guess I'll need to up the ante a little bit..."

The professor pulled the left sleeve of his lab coat, revealing Alain's Mega Ring on his wrist. So that's why it wasn't among the rest of his personal effects.

"He... he isn't going to Mega Evolve Charizard, isn't he?" Ash asked.
"There's no way he can!"

"Watch me, brat!" Larkspur said, tapping the Keystone with a finger.
"Charizard, hear my voice and heed my command! Mega Evolve!"

Much to Ash and Clemont's shock, the Keystone and Mega Stone reacted, glowing bright as tendrils of light shot from them. Said tendrils merged together, linking trainer and Pokemon, as Charizard transformed before Ash's eyes.

"No... it can't be... !" Ash cried.

Ash had seen Charizard transforming many times in the past, and such a sight always filled him with trepidation and excitement.

Now? It filled him with horror.

"How!? How did you do it?" Clemont asked, his glasses almost dropping from his face, which would have been comical if it wasn't for the situation at hand. "Mega Evolution it's impossible without a deep bond between trainer and Pokemon!"

"Oh, but Charizard and I share a very special bond! That of master and puppet, as you so eloquently have said before," Larkspur said with a sharp, almost demented grin. He then cleared his throat as he pushed his glasses up. "Though, if that answer isn't scientific enough for you - not that I'd blame you if that was the case - think of the bond between trainer and Pokemon as a synchronization, or harmonization process between two different minds and wills. However, since this Charizard has no mind or will of its own, I can simply override it with mine, not only achieving the desired harmonization, but making my control over it even greater! And all this thanks to the Will Suppressing Collar! Isn't science amazing?"

"You... you are demented..." Clemont began, his voice almost a whisper, as body trembling and hands clenching into fists as shock faded into anger. "What you've done is unspeakable! An abomination! You have no right to call yourself a scientist, much less a Pokemon Professor! For the sake of both people and Pokemon of this region, we will take you down!"

"You're welcome to try, kid, but you cannot stop me! No one can! I am the future, and the future is now, thanks to science!" Larkspur bellowed. "Charizard, Flamethrower!"

"Greninja, counter it with Water Shuriken!" Ash ordered.

"Electruxo, Scald!" Clemont ordered.

Charizard took a deep breath before releasing a torrent of blue flames, so hot the air around it started to ripple. Greninja once again threw a pair of liquid shuriken that he had summoned on each hand while Electruxo launched a stream of boiling water from his mouth. The three attacks clashed in the middle, producing a loud hissing noise followed by a cloud of steam expanding outwards.

"Energy Ball forward, Garlikid! Rapid fire!" Larkspur ordered, a hand clenching into a fist.

From within the cloud of steam emerged a barrage of glowing emerald orbs.

"Parry them with Night Slash, Greninja!" Ash shouted.

"Ninja!" Greninja nodded, generating another sword of purple energy between his webbed hands.

As the missiles came, Greninja sliced them to bits with swift motions that were almost impossible to see for the naked eye, leaping from one side to the other making sure no projectile would evade him.

"Now Charizard, Thunder Punch on Greninja while he's wide open!" Larkspur commanded with sadistic glee.

"We won't let you! Electruxo, Aqua Jet!" Clemont replied.

Once again, Charizard flapped its wings a couple times to take off, and dived towards Greninja, right claw clenched into a fist which was covered in yellow electricity. Meanwhile, Electruxo had cloaked himself in swirling water and barreled towards the incoming Flame Pokemon like a blue missile. The mind controlled Pokemon was forced to bring its fist down on the coming Electruxo once it was too close. The two Pokemon struggled against each other for a couple seconds before Charizard ultimately won, and sent Electruxo tumbling down against Greninja.

"Electruxo!" Clemont cried. "Ash, tell Greninja to move!"

"What?"

But the warning came too late, and Electruxo crashed on top of Greninja, causing both Pokemon to fall down.

"Gre!"

"Elec!"

"Now that they're vulnerable! Charizard, Flamethrower!"

"Quickly, move out of the way!" Ash urged. "Roll in opposite directions!"

Hovering over them, Charizard took a deep breath and rained a blue inferno over the two Water-type starters. However, the two Pokemon were able to follow Ash's command and rolled into opposite directions in order to avoid most of the attack, which only charred a section of the metallic floor, and jumped to their feet before Garlikid could join its partner with another move.

"Ash, I don't think Electruxo nor Greninja will be able to take down one Legendary Pokemon and another that's Mega Evolved!" Clemont told Ash. "We need to get on their level!"

"Understood!" Ash nodded, and looked at Greninja while he crossed his arms in front of his face. "Come on Greninja, show them that together, we're so much stronger!"

"The future is now thanks to Mega Evolution! Come on Electruxo, show them what you can do!" Clemont said, as he touched with two fingers the Keystone on his lightning bolt-shaped golden cufflink.

A watery tornado engulfed Greninja, while Electruxo was bound to Clemont by tendrils of light produced by both the Keystone the blond was touching and the Mega Stone on the Pokemon's collar. In a few seconds, both pokemon managed to reach their advanced forms, the helix of Mega Evolution flashing in front of Electruxo as the process finished.

Artificial clouds formed above the combatants, showering them in a thin rain as Drizzle took effect.

Larkspur merely snorted, unimpressed. "A brave effort, kids, but useless. Mega Evolution or not, you won't be able to match my Pokemon!"

"Those Pokemon aren't yours!" Ash angrily shouted.

"They do obey me, don't they?" Larkspur rebutted with a smug grin. "We can discuss semantics all you want, but in the end, that's the only thing that matters."

"It's not! You didn't train those Pokemon, so you don't know how to properly bring their full potential out to the surface! All you did was steal them and..." Clemont fired back, his anger subsiding for a moment as a realization dawned upon him. "The Team Omega grunts using my Aipom Arm and other of my gadgets... I always wondered how they were able to copy them, but now I remember..."

back in Rochfale Town, I showed you my inventions, blueprints and all. It was you, wasn't it!?"

"Guilty as charged," Larkspur shamelessly admitted. "But try to take it as a compliment rather than an offense, Clemont. Your inventions had so much potential, yet you used them for such mundane applications! As a scientist, I couldn't let such magnificent creations go underused like that!"

"SHUT UP! You are no scientist!" Clemont repeated, as he began to grimace in disgust. "My own creations were used to commit crimes and hurt Pokemon... good grief, I feel so... so... !"

Ash placed a comforting hand on his friend's shoulder. "Focus on the battle, Clemont. Yes, I know you must feel pretty awful right now, but think that you can make up for it by bringing down this scumbag."

Fortunately for Ash, this seemed to have the intended effect, as Clemont stopped shaking and grimacing, as resolve returned to his features. "You are right, this is no time for self-pity. I carelessly let my inventions be used by criminals, but I will fix that mistake right now!"

"Well said!" Ash said, fired up. "Alright, time to show this guy we mean business! Greninja, Water Shuriken at Charizard!"

"And Electruxo Scald on Garlikid!" Clemont followed.

"Pathetic! Charizard, dodge, and Garlikid, push through that attack and nail him with a Drain Punch!" Larkspur ordered.

Greninja summoned another pair of watery shuriken to his hands, these being bigger than normal thanks to the rain, and launched them at the airborne Flame Pokemon, who dodged them by flying in a zigzagging pattern, while Garlikid ran towards Electruxo, who was shooting a stream of boiling water from his mouth, before giving him a haymaker with a green glowing fist, sending the Hippocampus Pokemon hurling backwards.

"Electruxo! Hold on!" Clemont cried.

"Charizard, bring down the Dragon Claw!" Larkspur's voice was merciless.

"Parry it again with Night Slash!" Ash replied.

A sword made of dark energy appeared on Greninja's webbed hand, raising it just in time to parry the brutal blow coming from above producing a loud boom and raising a gust of wind, but the ninja frog resisted in place.

Larkspur's mouth curved into a sadistic grin. "Mach Punch!"

Greninja barely had time to react before a green blur blitzed him, sending him rolling backwards by a powerful punch to the face.

"Ugh... !" Ash winced in pain, hands involuntarily going to his face in order to nurse the phantom pain. "Gre-greninja... !"

"Follow up with Thunder Punch before he has any time to recover!" Larkspur shouted.

"Stop it with Scald, Electruxo!" Clemont shouted. "Don't count us out so soon!"

As Charizard slid towards the downed Greninja, claws curled into a fist crackling with yellow sparks, the stolen Pokemon was blasted in the face by a stream of boiling water that pushed it backwards.

"Drain Punch on Greninja, come on!" Larkspur ordered, his face slowly turning red.

Narrowing its red, glowing eyes, the mind controlled Grass-type Legendary Pokemon dived at Greninja, a green aura swirling around its fist.

"Greninja, Double Team!" Ash ordered.

For the second time in that battle, dozens of Greninja duplicates filled the wide hallway just as Garlikid smashed its enhanced fist into one of them, dispelling it instantly and making the whole instance quake when the fist hit the floor.

"That cheap trick again? Charizard, dispel them again with Flamethrower in a wide arc!" Larkspur impatiently commanded.

Charizard took a deep breath before releasing a stream of azure flames from its jaws, albeit a smaller and thinner one than before given the still falling rain.

The Team Omega boss grumbled something unintelligible, probably for making such an oversight. "Garlikid, help Charizard to dispel those copies with a barrage of Energy Balls!"

As the army of fake duplicates were dispelled, Clemont moved closer to Ash, and whispered: "Ash, as much as it pains to admit it, this isn't a fight we can win. You see how Garlikid ran circles around Greninja and Alain's Charizard that other time, there's no way we beat a Legendary Pokemon with a Mega Evolved one helping it. We need to destroy those mind control collars."

Ash nodded. "I see. Who should we liberate first, Garlikid or Charizard?"

"Garlikid. It's the more powerful of the two, and with Garlikid out of Larkspur's control, the fight will be over," Clemont explained.

"Understood. I have an idea to liberate Garlikid, but I need you to make sure to keep Charizard out of Greninja's hair, and be ready to strike when I tell you to," Ash said.

"What are you whispering, you two?" Larkspur shouted at them as his enslaved Pokemon finished the last of the copies. "Coming up with a plan to take me down, don't you? Ha! No plan you can cook up can match the combination of the power of my two Pokemon and my superior intellect!"

"Your superiority lies in stealing somebody else's work! Come on Electruxo, Electroweb on Charizard!" Clemont ordered.

"Greninja, Aerial Ace on Garlikid!" Ash followed-

"Deflect it with Steel Wing, Charizard!" Larkspur countered. "And Garlikid, keep that loathsome ninja away with Stone Edge!"

The Hippocampus Pokemon fired from his mouth at Charizard an orb of yellow lightning. Charizard, meanwhile, folded its wings together, which began to glow with a silvery sheen. As the electrical orb burst into a net of lightning bolts, the stolen Pokemon spread its wings outwards, dispelling the attack. Meanwhile, Greninja rushed towards Garlikid, his forearms and legs glowing with a pure white light, before Garlikid stomped its foot down, summoning a row of rising stone pillars at the coming frog. He dodged them, leaping to the side and continuing forward as the pillars emerged, but one of them almost hit him, forcing him to break his run and jump back, canceling the attack.

"Excellent! Follow up with Energy Ball!" Larkspur eagerly commanded.

Ash smirked. Larkspur had fallen on his trap. "Jump and use Ice Beam, Greninja! Aim for the legs!"

"What!?"

As Garlikid fired the emerald orb, Greninja leaped above the Legendary Pokemon and thrust his cupped hands down, firing a light blue energy beam that left Garlikid's legs completely frozen, leaving the Pokemon pinned to the ground.

"And follow up with Water Shuriken to Charizard!" Ash finally said. "Now's your chance, Clemont!"

"What the...?" Larkspur asked, unable to follow up on Ash and Clemont's tactic.

"Electruxo, Thunderbolt on Garlikid! Aim for the mind control collar!" Clemont said.

As Greninja quickly launched a pair of watery shuriken at Charizard, which found their mark and forced the stolen Pokemon to fall back, if only a little, Electruxo prepared his next attack.

"Eleeeeeeee..." Electruxo cried as his yellow fin glowed an electric yellow. "TRUUUUUUUX!"

Blinding yellow lightning shot from the Hippocampus Pokemon into the Hero Pokemon, more specifically its neck. Garlikid didn't even scream as the electricity washed over its body, the despicable device on its neck forcing it to endure the pain without complaining.

Once the attack was over, both Ash and Clemont waited expectantly for the collar to fall off and for Garlikid to return to its senses.

Too bad for them, said moment didn't come, as the Legendary Pokemon continued glaring at them with its red, soulless eyes.

"It didn't work...?" Ash asked, stumped.

Larkspur, who had watched everything with a bemused expression, broke into laughter. " *That* was your grand plan? To destroy the Willpower Suppressant? Oh boy, you truly *are* children..." Larkspur said, the laughter forcing him to bend over. "Don't you think that that's the most obvious thing one would do when facing a Pokemon carrying such a device? And that I wouldn't take it into account to make it as resistant to normal attacks as possible? Nothing short of an attack coming from a Legendary Pokemon will be able to break it!"

"That... complicates things..." Clemont said, gulping a little.

"Just for once, you're not wrong, my fellow scientist," Larkspur said, grinning, his opaque glasses glimmering in an eerie way. "So how about you surrender already? This isn't a battle that you can win, and

I'm a man who hates wasting time, not when there are so many things to do."

"Surrender? Ha! The Rangers already know the location of this base, all your lieutenants have been defeated, and your grunts are fleeing in droves!" Ash told the professor. "No matter the outcome of this fight, you have already lost!"

"Yes, you might have a point. Your little incursion here is going to cost me a bit," Larkspur nonchalantly admitted. "However, do you have any idea how much money I'm going to get from that Greninja of yours alone? His capture will make this day end in a positive net gain."

"You haven't captured Greninja yet!" Ash challenged.

" Yet being the key word, my young, dear countryside hick. Charizard, Dragon Claw on Electruxo! Garlikid Mach Punch on Greninja!" Larkspur ordered.

"Electruxo, quickly, Mist!" Clemont ordered.

"Elec, el!" Electruxo cried as it exhaled a huge cloud of white fog, engulfing Charizard and Garlikid, depriving them of any visibility and stopping their attacks on their tracks.

Still, Clemont knew that this had only bought them a few seconds at best.

"Ash, do you have any idea of how we can beat them? Because if freeing them isn't an option..." Clemont whispered to him.

"Who said it wasn't an option?" Ash asked, sounding oddly confident.

"Er... you just saw Electruxo trying to break those collars, he didn't even singe them," Clemont reminded Ash, worried that the Kantonian was starting to go mad. "Larkspur said that nothing short of a Legendary Pokemon could break them."

"It's a good thing we have a Legendary Pokemon at hand then," Ash said, fixing his eyes on Garlikid, who was visible once again after dispelling the mist with the wind created by the blowback of his powerful punches.

"Oh..." Clemont said, realizing what Ash was planning to do. "But getting Garlikid to break Charizard's collar will be complicated. It will require a great deal of precision and synchronicity."

"Luckily for us, synchronicity is mine and Greninja's forte. As we did before, keep Charizard occupied, and make sure it stays on the ground, leave the rest to me," Ash told the blond.

"Alright. I'll leave it in your hands, Ash!" Clemont said.

Ash nodded, and focused his mind on Greninja. For this maneuver to work, Ash and Greninja needed to be one, no words exchanged. The Kantonian boy immersed into the bond he shared with the Kalosian starter deeper than he had ever tried before. Yes, he could feel it... his Pokemon didn't resist the connection... Greninja's thoughts and his own thoughts were one and the same.

Then, Ash found something that wasn't there before.

"*Wait, what's this?*" Ash mentally asked, but found no response.

If Ash were to describe it, there was a well of power where there was nothing but emptiness before. Something that Ash had never felt in all the times he had harnessed Greninja's hidden power. Especially during the last days, when he tried to master that incomplete enhanced form of the Water Shuriken.

Tentatively, Ash reached into that power, only tapping a bit of it. The effects were instant, as his connection with Grenina solidified even more, manifesting in the form of a faint blue aura appearing around the Ninja Pokemon's body.

Then, Ash felt it. The rain.

It was the rain that filled this mysterious well of power. Was it that simple? Had Ash finally found the answer to the mystery that drove him close to madness? After how much Ash struggled to solve it, it was just something as easy as rain?

"Charizard, Dragon Claw on Electruxo! Garlikid, Stone Edge on Greninja!" Larkspur said.

The evil scientist's voice snapped Ash out of his thoughts. Alright, he had a battle to win, he could focus on his recent findings later.

"Greninja, jump on top of one of those pillars, quickly!" Ash ordered. The command was simple enough, but through their bond the boy was able to tell his Pokemon the true meaning behind it.

"Ninja!" Greninja said, as he jumped on top of one of the rising pillars, elevating him above the ground.

"Electruxo, Electro Ball!" Clemont ordered.

"Ele-TRU!" Electruxo cried as a sphere of yellow electricity shot out of his mouth towards Charizard.

The Fire and Dragon-type Pokemon shattered the attack with a swipe of its empowered claws, but the ensuing lightning explosion did a good job breaking the stolen Pokemon's momentum.

"And now, Aqua Jet!" was Clemont's next move.

Wasting no time, Electruxo covered his body in swirling water and barreled towards Charizard, slamming right into the Flame Pokemon's face, making it tumble backwards.

"Pin Charizard to the ground, don't let it move!" Clemont ordered.

Electruxo continued his onslaught by leaping onto Charizard, using his body to weigh the Fire and Dragon-type Pokemon down, who started to thrash wildly in an attempt to get rid of its unwanted passenger.

"You think such a simple tactic is enough to beat my team? Garlikid, destroy those pillars with Mach Punch!" Larkspur ordered.

Garlikid blasted through the pillars, shattering them in one swift punch each. As the pillars crumbled, Greninja jumped to the closest one in order to move away from the Legendary Pokemon, repeating the process until there were no more pillars left.

"Get down, Greninja!" Ash ordered.

As the last pillar was destroyed, Greninja leaped backwards, about to land on a spot next to Electruxo and Charizard, who were still fighting each other.

"Now, while he lands! Drain Punch! Don't let him have any window to dodge the attack!" Larkspur said, his voice growing excited.

"Now's the time, Clemont! Come on Greninja, let's do it together!" Ash said, as he once again immersed into the bond. "

As Greninja landed, Garlikid dashed forward, launching a green glowing fist at the Kalosian starter. However, Greninja was able to gracefully dodge by simply leaning to one side while grabbing the Legendary Pokemon's arm with his hands, and subtly use its own momentum to redirect the attack. More specifically, towards Charizard.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl as Electruxo jumped out of Charizard's back just in time, while the Kantonian Pokemon got back on its feet.

Just as Garlikid's punch, directed by Greninja and Ash working in tandem, impacted on Charizard's mind control collar, shattering it into hundreds of bits of metal and plastic, and sending the Pokemon crashing against a nearby metallic wall, making a loud clanging noise.

"NO!" Larkspur croaked, taking his hands to his head.

Despite the impact, it wasn't enough to knock Charizard out, who was able to push itself back to its feet, even with some difficulty. Still, it didn't look like it was in good enough condition to keep fighting, given how its legs wobbled and its eyes, no longer glowing red, appeared blurry. Then, all of sudden, white light briefly flashed over it as its body returned to its base state, before losing consciousness and collapsing on the floor facefirst.

"Yes! Without the mind control, the bond of Mega Evolution was broken and the transformation reversed!" Clemont cheerily noted. He pushed his glasses up. "It seemed that the backlash of the bond breaking in such an abrupt way was too much for it to handle."

"Charizard, return!" Larkspur grumbled as he returned Charizard to its pokeball, before pocketing it away. Despite the opaque glasses, Ash knew the professor was glaring daggers at him and Clemont.. "You're going to pay for this."

"I find it unlikely. You may still have Garlikid, but with Charizard out of the way, Greninja and Electruxo can bring it down if they work together." Clemont said.

"Exactly! That's what you get for underestimating us! No matter how powerful they are, you won't beat us with stolen Pokemon!" Ash added.

"Pi-pika!" Pikachu agreed.

Larkspur was about to angrily reply, but words died in his mouth as he took a deep breath, calming himself down. "You know what? You are right. At least when it comes to one fact: I did underestimate you," the professor admitted. "Your Pokemon are strong and well trained, and your teamwork is impeccable. You would have gone far in Team Omega."

"No thanks. I don't think my mom would have been too happy if I joined a criminal gang," Ash sardonically replied.

Larkspur ignored the snarky reply. "I felt I was so above you I believed I could just toy with you before delivering the final blow, just to show you how hopelessly outmatched you were. And that mistake cost me. But hey, the one good thing about mistakes is that we can learn from them, right? That's why I decided not to prolong this any longer! Get ready, I'm going to crush you with a force you cannot even imagine!"

Larkspur pulled the right sleeve of his lab coat, revealing Leona's Z-ring on his wrist. So that's why it wasn't among the rest of the personal effects either.

"I believe you have already witnessed the power of the Z-moves, haven't you? I would have missed such a thing if it wasn't for one of my Captains, who is an avid contest follower, watching that Alolan girl on TV," Larkspur began. "Now imagine how powerful a Z-move would be if it's used by a Legendary Pokemon! Come on Garlikid!"

As Larkspur and Garlikid made the required poses for the move to work - rather sloppily in Larkspur's case - Ash knew that he had to do something. The professor was right, such an attack had the power to knock out both Greninja and Electruxo, even without taking into account all the damage they had taken so far.

The answer, however, couldn't be more obvious.

"Greninja! We're going to stop that Z-move!" Ash said. "Let's use that attack! I'm sure that this time it will work!"

And if it doesn't... well, it's not like they had any alternatives.

Greninja nodded, and raised his hand over his head. His faint blue aura flared to life with more intensity, before he was briefly engulfed by a spiraling torrent of water, a process Ash had seen before, but this time, the torrent was larger and the water roar was louder.

"GREEEEEEEE... !" Greninja croaked from within the water torrent.

Then, much to Ash and Clemont's surprise, the spiraling torrent began to drain all the raindrops falling from above as if it was a vacuum cleaner. Then, not just the rain, but the clouds themselves, encasing Greninja in a tornado of clouds.

"Ash! What's going on? What is Greninja doing!?" Clemont asked.

"I don't know! But this is our only chance at victory!" Ash replied.

The tornado of torrential water and clouds disappeared, revealing Greninja holding above his head a massive shuriken made of water and storm clouds, with yellow lightning jumping from it.

"Pikaa..." Pikachu said in awe.

"What... what attack is that? Is that a water shuriken...?" Clemont asked in amazement, his glasses sliding off his nose.

"No, this isn't Water Shuriken," Ash said, as an indescribable sensation filled his body. He never felt his connection to Greninja so strongly as he did now. "The name of this attack is..."

"This is your end, kids! Bloom Doom!" Larkspur commanded.

Garlikid's body was surrounded by a light green aura, as flowers covered the ground of the hallway. The energy surrounding Garlikid morphed into an orb between its hands, firing it in the form of a massive golden-green beam.

"... STORM SHURIKEN!"

"GRE!"

Greninja launched the newly named attack forward, the projectile of spinning thunderclouds crackling loudly. The two attacks met in the middle, producing an explosion followed by a thunderclap that blew such a powerful wind in every direction that threatened to launch every human and Pokemon away. The shuriken had turned into a

veritable furious spinning elemental dome, doing its best to overpower the Grass-type attack used by Garlikid.

"Electruxo, help Greninja with Thunderbolt!" Clemont ordered.

Electruxo nodded, his dorsal fins glowing yellow as they gathered electricity, before releasing it in the form of a single blast, reinforcing Greninja's elemental dome.

A few seconds passed, and it became obvious that no attack would ever overpower the other. Soon, both attacks began to shrink down as they expended the last of their power, until they disappeared completely.

For a few seconds, silence reigned.

"Unbelievable..." professor Larkspur said, his voice filled with shock, as he adjusted his glasses, which had almost been blown out of his face by the powerful winds. "Your Greninja stopped a Z-move on its tracks... just like that..."

"ARGH!/GRE!" Ash and Greninja cried in unison, as they both fell to their knees, the latter returning to his base form.

"Ash!" Clemont was quick to support his friend. "Ash, are you okay?"

"I feel... as if I've been trampled by a herd of raging Tauros..." Ash wheezed, letting Clemont support him. And he had the feeling that Greninja was feeling the same.

"That attack was incredible, indeed," Larkspur said, as he slowly recovered his composure. "The power of that move was simply breathtaking. But alas, it seems to have quite the inconvenient backlash, don't you think?" the professor mockingly asked, earning a hateful stare from Ash. "You may have stopped the Z-move, but in the end, the result was the same. Your Greninja cannot fight anymore, and I doubt Clemont has any Pokemon that can hope to match my Garlikid."

"Garlikid isn't yours!" Ash repeated once again.

"Like I said before, we can spend all day here discussing semantics, but in the end, what matters is that Garlikid obeys me and me alone," Larkspur darkly said. "Now, time to finish that Greninja off!"

"G-Gree... !" Greninja weakly croaked, as he tried to get back to his feet.

"El!" Electruxo cried, standing next to Greninja, but the Mega Evolved Pokemon's body language betrayed his rapidly diminishing confidence in a victorious outcome for this battle.

"No, Garlikid, don't do it! Don't let this evil man control you!" Clemont urged.

"You're a hero! A protector of the weak! A defender of justice! Don't let this man turn you into a tool to harm innocent people and Pokemon!" Ash pleaded as well. "You're much stronger than him! Your will and heroic spirit is much stronger than his mind control collar!"

Larkspur let out a mocking laugh. "Your desperation is so sweet. Plead all you want, there's only one person Garlikid will obey, the same person your Greninja will soon address as its master! Garlikid, Mach Punch!"

"Garlikid, no-!"

Before Ash could plead any further, Garlikid's body tensed for a fraction of a second and barreled towards Greninja, so fast that Electruxo wasn't even able to react despite being next to him, followed by a thud and a swishing noise.

"... huh?"

Contrary to what Ash expected to see, Greninja was still standing. In front of him was Garlikid, right arm stretched, its fist a centimeter

away from the frog's face. The Legendary Pokemon's body trembled irregularly, jaw clenched and one of its red glowing eyes twitching.

"It... stopped?" Clemont asked, a glimmer of hope in his voice.

He wasn't the only one taken aback by this new development, not without reason. Larkspur's reaction, however, was the complete opposite. "Garlikid, what are you doing! Finish those Pokemon off, right now!"

But Garlikid didn't move, and remained there, its trembling fist still extended.

"Yes! Come on Garlikid, fight it off! Don't let him control you!" Ash encouraged.

"G-G-G-Ga... !" Garlikid managed to growl, as it slowly began to pull away its fist from Greninja's face.

"NO! This can't be happening!" Larkspur hollered, losing his composure once again. "My Willpower Suppressant Collar is perfect!"

"G-G-G..." a choked noise came out of Garlikid's throat as it slowly brought its hands to the mind controlling device.

"No, stop it!" Larkspur shouted, as he rushed to reach Garlikid. "You can't-"

"Elec!" Unfortunately for him, Electruxo jumped between the evil scientist and the Legendary Pokemon, his dorsal fin crackling menacingly with yellow sparks.

"Well done, Electruxo!" Clemont praised.

"G-G-Gaaar... !" Garlikid began to pull the metallic device in opposite directions with all its might. Cracking noises could be heard coming from the collar as the Legendary Pokemon kept pulling.

"Come on Garlikid, almost there!" Ash encouraged it.

"Pikapi!" Pikachu cheered as well.

"KIIIIID!"

There was a shattering noise, and the Will Suppressant Collar was broken in half in a burst of metal bits, plastic pieces and electric sparks, releasing the Legendary Pokemon, signaled by its glowing red eyes returning to its usual beady black, before falling to its knees in exhaustion.

"Ga... Garli..." Garlikid wheezed, now finally free.

"Impossible..." Larkspur said in a whisper, dropping to his knees as well.

"I told you you wouldn't beat us with stolen, mind controlled Pokemon, didn't I?" Ash said, now able to stand on his own without Clemont's help.

"You are not the future, Professor Larkspur. People like you rarely are," Clemont told the defeated man, his eyes full of righteous anger, but also satisfaction. "Team Omega has seen its last day,"

The defeated Team Omega boss didn't say anything.

Author's Note: And thus, the Team Omega plotline comes to an end. The evil organization is defeated for good, Garlikid is free and Charizard is back to its legitimate trainer.

I hope you enjoyed the battles, all of them. I remember some people asking me to give Bonnie and Dedenne more moments in battles, so I hope you're happy with their contribution to the fight. While I'm not fond of Dedenne in general, I guess it couldn't hurt to give him a moment to shine.

Regarding Larkspur, in the game he has his own team, though none of his Pokemon are anything special and he's not particularly challenging. And given that Larkspur had Garlikid captured in the game as well, I believed it would be great if he used the Hero Pokemon alongside Alain's Charizard. And just like before, rather than beating Garlikid through brute force, it was once of Ash's heroic speeches which gave the walking garlic the push it needed in order to overcome the mind control (I assume that, since Garlikid is a legendary Pokemon, it would have greater resistance to mind control than ordinary Pokemon like Charizard).

And alas, the mystery of the empowered Water Shuriken is finally solved! You probably don't remember, but I dropped a hint to the solution in chapter 49, when Serena mentioned that some attacks only work under specific weather conditions. And given that Ash-Greninja has never fought before under rain (regular Greninja did, though), I decided to take the chance. Needless to say, while Ash won't abuse it, expect to see the Storm Shuriken again in future high-stake battles.

Thanks a lot to Fox McCloud, Lipeghoul, hirowriter, MarcusDarkus87, Guest, BrightNova169 and MegaSalamence64 for reviewing the last chapter.

Next chapter, our heroes take a much needed rest after all the battles. In the meantime, don't forget to drop a review!